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SALVAGE IN SPACE

To Thad Allen, meteor miner, comes the dangerous bonanza of a derelict rocket-flier manned by death invisible.

His "planet" was the smallest in the solar system, and the loneliest, Thad Allen was thinking, as he straightened wearily in the huge, bulging, inflated fabric of his Osprey space armor. Walking awkwardly in the magnetic boots that held him to the black mass of meteoric iron, he mounted a projection and stood motionless, staring moodily away through the vision panels of his bulky helmet into the dark mystery of the void.

His welding arc dangled at his belt, the electrode still glowing red. He had just finished securing to this slowly-accumulated mass of iron his most recent find, a meteorite the size of his head.

Five perilous weeks he had labored, to collect this rugged lump of metal—a jagged mass, some ten feet in diameter, composed of hundreds of fragments, that he had captured and welded together. His luck had not been good. His findings had been heart-breakingly small; the spectro-flash analysis had revealed that the content of the precious metals was disappointingly minute.[1]

[Footnote 1: The meteor or asteroid belt, between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, is "mined" by such adventurers as Thad Allen for the platinum, iridium and osmium that all meteoric irons contain in small quantities. The meteor swarms are supposed by some astronomers to be fragments of a disrupted planet, which, according to Bode's Law, should occupy this space.]

On the other side of this tiny sphere of hard-won treasure, his Millen atomic rocket was sputtering, spurts of hot blue flame jetting from its exhaust. A simple mechanism, bolted to the first sizable fragment he had captured, it drove the iron ball through space like a ship.

Through the magnetic soles of his insulated boots, Thad could feel the vibration of the iron mass, beneath the rocket's regular thrust. The magazine of uranite fuel capsules was nearly empty, now, he reflected. He would soon have to

turn back toward Mars.

Turn back. But how could he, with so slender a reward for his efforts? Meteor mining is expensive. There was his bill at Millen and Helion, Mars, for uranite and supplies. And the unpaid last instalment on his Osprey suit. How could he outfit himself again, if he returned with no more metal than this? There were men who averaged a thousand tons of iron a month. Why couldn't fortune smile on him?

He knew men who had made fabulous strikes, who had captured whole planetoids of rich metal, and he knew weary, white-haired men who had braved the perils of vacuum and absolute cold and bullet-swift meteors for hard years, who still hoped.

But sometime fortune had to smile, and then....

The picture came to him. A tower of white metal, among the low red hills near Helion. A slim, graceful tower of argent, rising in a fragrant garden of flowering Martian shrubs, purple and saffron. And a girl waiting, at the silver door—a trim, slender girl in white, with blue eyes and hair richly brown.

Thad had seen the white tower many times, on his holiday tramps through the hills about Helion. He had even dared to ask if it could be bought, to find that its price was an amount that he might not amass in many years at his perilous profession. But the girl in white was yet only a glorious dream....

The strangeness of interplanetary space, and the somber mystery of it, pressed upon him like an illimitable and deserted ocean. The sun was a tiny white disk on his right, hanging between rosy coronal wings; his native Earth, a bright greenish point suspended in the dark gulf below it; Mars, nearer, smaller, a little ocher speck above the shrunken sun. Above him, below him, in all directions was vastness, blackness, emptiness. Ebon infinity, sprinkled with far, cold stars.

Thad was alone. Utterly alone. No man was visible, in all the supernal vastness of space. And no work of man—save the few tools of his daring trade, and the glittering little rocket bolted to the black iron behind him. It was terrible to think that the nearest human being must be tens of millions of miles away.

On his first trips, the loneliness had been terrible, unendurable. Now he was becoming accustomed to it. At least, he no longer feared that he was going mad. But sometimes....

Thad shook himself and spoke aloud, his voice ringing hollow in his huge metal helmet:

"Brace up, old top. In good company, when you're by yourself, as Dad used to say. Be back in Helion in a week or so, anyhow. Look up Dan and 'Chuck' and the rest of the crowd again, at Comet's place. What price a friendly boxing match with Mason, or an evening at the teleview theater?

"Fresh air instead of this stale synthetic stuff! Real food, in place of these

tasteless concentrates! A hot bath, instead of greasing yourself!

"Too dull out here. Life—" He broke off, set his jaw.

No use thinking about such things. Only made it worse. Besides, how did he know that a whirring meteor wasn't going to flash him out before he got back?

He drew his right arm out of the bulging sleeve of the suit, into its ample interior, found a cigarette in an inside pocket, and lighted it. The smoke swirled about in the helmet, drawn swiftly into the air filters.

"Darn clever, these suits," he murmured. "Food, smokes, water generator, all where you can reach them. And darned expensive, too. I'd better be looking for pay metal!"

He clambered to a better position; stood peering out into space, searching for the tiny gleam of sunlight on a meteoric fragment that might be worth capturing for its content of precious metals. For an hour he scanned the black, star-strewn gulf, as the sputtering rocket continued to drive him forward.

"There she glows!" he cried suddenly, and grinned.

Before him was a tiny, glowing fleck, that moved among the unchanging stars. He stared at it intensely, breathing faster in the helmet.

Always he thrilled to see such a moving gleam. What treasure it promised! At first sight, it was impossible to determine size or distance or rate of motion. It might be ten thousand tons of rich metal. A fortune! It would more probably prove to be a tiny, stony mass, not worth capturing. It might even be large and valuable, but moving so rapidly that he could not overtake it with the power of the diminutive Millen rocket.

He studied the tiny speck intently, with practised eye, as the minutes passed—an untrained eye would never have seen it at all, among the flaming hosts of stars. Skilfully he judged, from its apparent rate of motion and its slow increase in brilliance, its size and distance from him.

"Must be—must be fair size," he spoke aloud, at length. "A hundred tons, I'll bet my helmet! But scooting along pretty fast. Stretch the little old rocket to run it down."

He clambered back to the rocket, changed the angle of the flaming exhaust, to drive him directly across the path of the object ahead, filled the magazine again with the little pellets of uranite, which were fed automatically into the combustion chamber, and increased the firing rate.

The trailing blue flame reached farther backward from the incandescent orifice of the exhaust. The vibration of the metal sphere increased. Thad left the sputtering rocket and went back where he could see the object before him.

It was nearer now, rushing obliquely across his path. Would he be in time to

capture it as it passed, or would it hurtle by ahead of him, and vanish in the limitless darkness of space before his feeble rocket could check the momentum of his ball of metal?

He peered at it, as it drew closer.

Its surface seemed oddly bright, silvery. Not the dull black of meteoric iron. And it was larger, more distant, than he had thought at first. In form, too, it seemed curiously regular, ellipsoid. It was no jagged mass of metal.

His hopes sank, rose again immediately. Even if it were not the mass of rich metal for which he had prayed, it might be something as valuable—and more interesting.

He returned to the rocket, adjusted the angle of the nozzle again, and advanced the firing time slightly, even at the risk of a ruinous explosion.

When he returned to where he could see the hurtling object before him, he saw that it was a ship. A tapering silver-green rocket-flier.

Once more his dreams were dashed. The officers of interplanetary liners lose no love upon the meteor miners, claiming that their collected masses of metal, almost helpless, always underpowered, are menaces to navigation. Thad could expect nothing from the ship save a heliographed warning to keep clear.

But how came a rocket-flier here, in the perilous swarms of the meteor belt? Many a vessel had been destroyed by collision with an asteroid, in the days before charted lanes were cleared of drifting metal.

The lanes more frequently used, between Earth, Mars, Venus and Mercury, were of course far inside the orbits of the asteroids. And the few ships running to Jupiter's moons avoided them by crossing millions of miles above their plane.

Could it be that legendary green ship, said once to have mysteriously appeared, sliced up and drawn within her hull several of the primitive ships of that day, and then disappeared forever after in the remote wastes of space? Absurd, of course: he dismissed the idle fancy and examined the ship still more closely.

Then he saw that it was turning, end over end, very slowly. That meant that its gyros were stopped; that it was helpless, drifting, disabled, powerless to avoid hurtling meteoric stones. Had it blundered unawares into the belt of swarms—been struck before the danger was realized? Was it a derelict, with all dead upon it?

Either the ship's machinery was completely wrecked, Thad knew, or there was no one on watch. For the controls of a modern rocket-flier are so simple and so nearly automatic that a single man at the bridge can keep a vessel upon her course.

It might be, he thought, that a meteorite had ripped open the hull, allowing the air to escape so quickly that the entire crew had been asphyxiated before any

repairs could be made. But that seemed unlikely, since the ship must have been divided into several compartments by air-tight bulkheads.

Could the vessel have been deserted for some reason? The crew might have mutinied, and left her in the life-tubes. She might have been robbed by pirates, and set adrift. But with the space lanes policed as they were, piracy and successful mutiny were rare.

Thad saw that the flier's navigation lights were out.

He found the heliograph signal mirror at his side, sighted it upon the ship, and worked the mirror rapidly. He waited, repeated the call. There was no response.

The vessel was plainly a derelict. Could he board her, and take her to Mars? By law, it was his duty to attempt to aid any helpless ship, or at least to try to save any endangered lives upon her. And the salvage award, if the ship should be deserted and he could bring her safe to port, would be half her value.

No mean prize, that. Half the value of ship and cargo! More than he was apt to earn in years of mining the meteor-belt.

With new anxiety, he measured the relative motion of the gleaming ship. It was going to pass ahead of him. And very soon. No more time for speculation. It was still uncertain whether it would come near enough so that he could get a line to it.

Rapidly he unslung from his belt the apparatus he used to capture meteors. A powerful electromagnet, with a thin, strong wire fastened to it, to be hurled from a helix-gun. He set the drum on which the wire was wound upon the metal at his feet, fastened it with its magnetic anchor, wondering if it would stand the terrific strain when the wire tightened.

Raising the helix to his shoulder, he trained it upon a point well ahead of the rushing flier, and stood waiting for the exact moment to press the lever. The slender spindle of the ship was only a mile away now, bright in the sunlight. He could see no break in her polished hull, save for the dark rows of circular ports. She was not, by any means, completely wrecked.

He read the black letters of her name.

Red Dragon.

The name of her home port, below, was in smaller letters. But in a moment he made them out. San Francisco. The ship then came from the Earth! From the very city where Thad was born!

The gleaming hull was near now. Only a few hundred yards away. Passing. Aiming well ahead of her, to allow for her motion, Thad pressed the key that hurled the magnet from the helix. It flung away from him, the wire screaming from the reel behind it.

Thad's mass of metal swung on past the ship, as he returned to the rocket and stopped its clattering explosions. He watched the tiny black speck of the magnet. It vanished from sight in the darkness of space, appeared again against the white, burnished hull of the rocket ship.

For a painful instant he thought he had missed. Then he saw that the magnet was fast to the side of the flier, near the stern. The line tightened. Soon the strain would come upon it, as it checked the momentum of the mass of iron. He set the friction brake.

Thad flung himself flat, grasped the wire above the reel. Even if the mass of iron tore itself free, he could hold to the wire, and himself reach the ship.

He flung past the deserted vessel, behind it, his lump of iron swung like a pebble in a sling. A cloud of smoke burst from the burned lining of the friction brake, in the reel. Then the wire was all out; there was a sudden jerk.

And the hard-gathered sphere of metal was gone—snapped off into space. Thad clung desperately to the wire, muscles cracking, tortured arms almost drawn from their sockets. Fear flashed over his mind; what if the wire broke, and left him floating helpless in space?

It held, though, to his relief. He was trailing behind the ship. Eagerly he seized the handle of the reel; began to wind up the mile of thin wire. Half an hour later, Thad's suited figure bumped gently against the shining hull of the rocket. He got to his feet, and gazed backward into the starry gulf, where his sphere of iron had long since vanished.

"Somebody is going to find himself a nice chunk of metal, all welded together and equipped for rocket navigation," he murmured. "As for me—well, I've simply got to run this tub to Mars!"

He walked over the smooth, refulgent hull, held to it by magnetic soles. Nowhere was it broken, though he found scars where small meteoric particles had scratched the brilliant polish. So no meteor had wrecked the ship. What, then, was the matter? Soon he would know.

The Red Dragon was not large. A hundred and thirty feet long, Thad estimated, with a beam of twenty-five feet. But her trim lines bespoke design recent and good; the double ring of black projecting rockets at the stern told of unusual speed.

A pretty piece of salvage, he reflected, if he could land her on Mars. Half the value of such a ship, unharmed and safe in port, would be a larger sum than he dared put in figures. And he must take her in, now that he had lost his own rocket!

He found the life-tubes, six of them, slender, silvery cylinders, lying secure in their niches, three along each side of the flier. None was missing. So the crew had not willingly deserted the ship.

He approached the main air-lock, at the center of the hull, behind the pro-

jecting dome of the bridge. It was closed. A glance at the dials told him there was full air pressure within it. It had, then, last been used to enter the rocket, not to leave it.

Thad opened the exhaust valve, let the air hiss from the chamber of the lock. The huge door swung open in response to his hand upon the wheel, and he entered the cylindrical chamber. In a moment the door was closed behind him, air was hissing into the lock again.

He started to open the face-plate of his helmet, longing for a breath of air that did not smell of sweat and stale tobacco smoke, as that in his suit always did, despite the best chemical purifiers. Then he hesitated. Perhaps some deadly gas, from the combustion chambers....

Thad opened the inner valve, and came upon the upper deck of the vessel. A floor ran the full length of the ship, broken with hatches and companionways that gave to the rocket rooms, cargo holds, and quarters for crew and passengers below. There was an enclosed ladder that led to bridge and navigating room in the dome above. The hull formed an arched roof over it.

The deck was deserted, lit only by three dim blue globes, hanging from the curved roof. All seemed in order—the fire-fighting equipment hanging on the walls, and the huge metal patches and welding equipment for repairing breaks in the hull. Everything was clean, bright with polish or new paint.

And all was very still. The silence held a vague, brooding threat that frightened Thad, made him wish for a moment that he was back upon his rugged ball of metal. But he banished his fear, and strode down the deck.

Midway of it he found a dark stain upon the clean metal. The black of long-dried blood. A few tattered scraps of cloth beside it. No more than bloody rags. And a heavy meat cleaver, half hidden beneath a bit of darkened fabric.

Mute record of tragedy! Thad strove to read it. Had a man fought here and been killed? It must have been a struggle of peculiar violence, to judge by the dark spattered stains, and the indescribable condition of the remnants of clothing. But what had he fought? Another man, or some thing? And what had become of victor and vanquished?

He walked on down the deck.

The torturing silence was broken by the abrupt patter of quick little footsteps behind him. He turned quickly, nervously, with a hand going instinctively to his welding arc, which, he knew, would make a fairly effective weapon.

It was merely a dog. A little dog, yellow, nondescript, pathetically delighted. With a sharp, eager bark, it leaped up at Thad, pawing at his armor and licking it, standing on its hind legs and reaching toward the visor of his helmet.

It was very thin, as if from long starvation. Both ears were ragged and bloody, and there was a long, unhealed scratch across the shoulder, somewhat inflamed,

but not a serious wound.

The bright, eager eyes were alight with joy. But Thad thought he saw fear in them. And even through the stiff fabric of the Osprey suit, he felt that the dog was trembling.

Suddenly, with a low whine, it shrank close to his side. And another sound reached Thad's ears.

A cry, weird and harrowing beyond telling. A scream so thin and so high that it roughened his skin, so keenly shrill that it tortured his nerves; a sound of that peculiar frequency that is more agonizing than any bodily pain.

When silence came again, Thad was standing with his back against the wall, the welding arc in his hand. His face was cold with sweat, and a queer chill prickled up and down his spine. The yellow dog crouched whimpering against his legs.

Ominous, threatening stillness filled the ship again, disturbed only by the whimpers and frightened growls of the dog. Trying to calm his overwrought nerves, Thad listened—strained his ears. He could hear nothing. And he had no idea from which direction the terrifying sound had come.

A strange cry. Thad knew it had been born in no human throat. Nor in the throat of any animal he knew. It had carried an alien note that overcame him with instinctive fear and horror. What had voiced it? Was the ship haunted by some dread entity?

For many minutes Thad stood upon the deck, waiting, tensely grasping the welding tool. But the nerve-shattering scream did not come again. Nor any other sound. The yellow dog seemed half to forget its fear. It leaped up at his face again, with another short little bark.

The air must be good, he thought, if the dog could live in it.

He unscrewed the face-plate of his helmet, and lifted it. The air that struck his face was cool and clean. He breathed deeply, gratefully. And at first he did not notice the strange odor upon it: a curious, unpleasant scent, earthly, almost fetid, unfamiliar.

The dog kept leaping up, whining.

"Hungry, boy?" Thad whispered.

He fumbled in the bulky inside pockets of his suit, found a slab of concentrated food, and tossed it out through the opened panel. The dog sprang upon it, wolfed it eagerly, and came back to his side.

Thad set at once about exploring the ship.

First he ascended the ladder to the bridge. A metal dome covered it, studded with transparent ports. Charts and instruments were in order. And the room was vacant, heavy with the fatal silence of the ship.

Thad had no expert's knowledge of the flier's mechanism. But he had studied interplanetary navigation, to qualify for his license to carry masses of metal under rocket power through the space lanes and into planetary atmospheres. He was sure he could manage the ship if its mechanism were in good order, though he was uncertain of his ability to make any considerable repairs.

To his relief, a scrutiny of the dials revealed nothing wrong.

He started the gyro motors, got the great wheels to spinning, and thus stopped the slow, end-over-end turning of the flier. Then he went to the rocket controls, warmed three of the tubes, and set them to firing. The vessel answered readily to her helm. In a few minutes he had the red fleck of Mars over the bow.

"Yes, I can run her, all right," he announced to the dog, which had followed him up the steps, keeping close to his feet. "Don't worry, old boy. We'll be eating a juicy beefsteak together, in a week. At Comet's place in Helion, down by the canal. Not much style—but the eats!

"And now we're going to do a little detective work, and find out what made that disagreeable noise. And what happened to all your fellow-astronauts. Better find out, before it happens to us!"

He shut off the rockets, and climbed down from the bridge again.

When Thad started down the companionway to the officers' quarters, in the central one of the five main compartments of the ship, the dog kept close to his legs, growling, trembling, hackles lifted. Sensing the animal's terror, pitying it for the naked fear in its eyes, Thad wondered what dramas of horror it might have seen.

The cabins of the navigator, calculator, chief technician, and first officer were empty, and forbidding with the ominous silence of the ship. They were neatly in order, and the berths had been made since they were used. But there was a large bloodstain, black and circular, on the floor of the calculator's room.

The captain's cabin held evidence of a violent struggle. The door had been broken in. Its fragments, with pieces of broken furniture, books, covers from the berth, and three service pistols, were scattered about in indescribable confusion, all stained with blood. Among the frightful debris, Thad found several scraps of clothing, of dissimilar fabrics. The guns were empty.

Attempting to reconstruct the action of the tragedy from those grim clues, he imagined that the five officers, aware of some peril, had gathered here, fought, and died.

The dog refused to enter the room. It stood at the door, looking anxiously after him, trembling and whimpering pitifully. Several times it sniffed the air and drew back, snarling. Thad thought that the unpleasant earthy odor he had noticed upon opening the face-plate of his helmet was stronger here.

After a few minutes of searching through the wildly disordered room, he

found the ship's log—or its remains. Many pages had been torn from the book, and the remainder, soaked with blood, formed a stiff black mass.

Only one legible entry did he find, that on a page torn from the book, which somehow had escaped destruction. Dated five months before, it gave the position of the vessel and her bearings—she was then just outside Jupiter's orbit, Earthward bound—and concluded with a remark of sinister implications:

"Another man gone this morning. Simms, assistant technician. A fine workman. O'Deen swears he heard something moving on the deck. Cook thinks some of the doctor's stuffed monstrosities have come to life. Ridiculous, of course. But what is one to think?"

Pondering the significance of those few lines, Thad climbed back to the deck. Was the ship haunted by some weird death, that had seized the crew man by man, mysteriously? That was the obvious implication. And if the flier had been still outside Jupiter's orbit when those words were written, it must have been weeks before the end. A lurking, invisible death! The scream he had heard....

He descended into the forecastle, and came upon another such silent record of frightful carnage as he had found in the captain's cabin. Dried blood, scraps of cloth, knives and other weapons. A fearful question was beginning to obsess him. What had become of the bodies of those who must have died in these conflicts? He dared not think the answer.

Gripping the welding arc, Thad approached the after hatch, giving to the cargo hold. Trepidation almost overpowered him, but he was determined to find the sinister menace of the ship, before it found him. The dog whimpered, hung back, and finally deserted him, contributing nothing to his peace of mind.

The hold proved to be dark. An indefinite black space, oppressive with the terrible silence of the flier. The air within it bore still more strongly the unpleasant fetor.

Thad hesitated on the steps. The hold was not inviting. But at the thought that he must sleep, unguarded, while taking the flier to Mars, his resolution returned. The uncertainty, the constant fear, would be unendurable.

He climbed on down, feeling for the light button. He found it, as his feet touched the floor. Blue light flooded the hold.

It was filled with monstrous things, colossal creatures, such as nothing that ever lived upon the Earth; like nothing known in the jungles of Venus or the deserts of Mars, or anything that has been found upon Jupiter's moons.

They were monsters remotely resembling insects or crustaceans, but as large as horses or elephants; creatures upreared upon strange limbs, armed with hideously fanged jaws, cruel talons, frightful, saw-toothed snouts, and glittering scales, red and yellow and green. They leered at him with phosphorescent eyes, yellow and purple.

They cast grotesquely gigantic shadows in the blue light....

A cold shock of horror started along Thad's spine, at sight of those incredible nightmare things. Automatically be flung up the welding tool, flicking over the lever with his thumb, so that violet electric flame played about the electrode.

Then he saw that the crowding, hideous things were motionless, that they stood upon wooden pedestals, that many of them were supported upon metal bars. They were dead. Mounted. Collected specimens of some alien life.

Grinning wanly, and conscious of a weakness in the knees, he muttered: "They sure will fill the museum, if everybody gets the kick out of them that I did. A little too realistic, I'd say. Guess these are the 'stuffed monstrosities' mentioned in the page out of the log. No wonder the cook was afraid of them. Some of then do look hellishly alive!"

He started across the hold, shrinking involuntarily from the armored enormities that seemed crouched to spring at him, motionless eyes staring.

So, at the end of the long space, he found the treasure.

Glittering in the blue light, it looked unreal. Incredible. A dazzling dream. He stopped among the fearful things that seemed gathered as if to guard it, and stared with wide eyes through the opened face-plate of his helmet.

He saw neat stacks of gold ingots, new, freshly smelted; bars of silver-white iridium, of argent platinum, of blue-white osmium. Many of them. Thousands of pounds, Thad knew. He trembled at thought of their value. Almost beyond calculation.

Then he saw the coffer, lying beyond the piled, gleaming ingots—a huge box, eight feet long; made of some crystal that glittered with snowy whiteness, filled with sparkling, iridescent gleams, and inlaid with strange designs, apparently in vermilion enamel.

With a little cry, he ran toward the chest, moving awkwardly in the loose, deflated fabric of the Osprey suit.

Beside the coffer, on the floor of the hold, was literally a mountain of flame—blazing gems, heaped as if they had been carelessly dumped from it; cut diamonds, incredibly gigantic; monster emeralds, sapphires, rubies; and strange stones, that Thad did not recognize.

And Thad gasped with horror, when he looked at the designs of the vermilion inlay, in the white, gleaming crystal. Weird forms. Shapes of creatures somewhat like gigantic spiders, and more unlike them. Demoniac things, wickedly fanged, jaws slavering. Executed with masterly skill, that made them seem living, menacing, secretly gloating!

Thad stared at them for long minutes, fascinated almost hypnotically. Three times he approached the chest, to lift the lid and find what it held. And three times

the unutterable horror of those crimson images thrust him back, shuddering.

"Nothing but pictures," he muttered hoarsely.

A fourth time he advanced, trembling, and seized the lid of the coffer. Heavy, massive, it was fashioned also of glistening white crystal, and inlaid in crimson with weirdly hideous figures. Great hinges of white platinum held it on the farther side; it was fastened with a simple, heavy hasp of the precious metal.

Hands quivering, Thad snapped back the hasp, lifted the lid.

New treasure in the chest would not have surprised him. He was prepared to meet dazzling wonders of gems or priceless metal. Nor would he have been astonished at some weird creature such as one of those whose likenesses were inlaid in the crystal.

But what he saw made him drop the massive lid.

A woman lay in the chest—motionless, in white.

In a moment he raised the lid again; examined the still form more closely. The woman had been young. The features were regular, good to look upon. The eyes were closed; the white face appeared very peaceful.

Save for the extreme, cadaverous pallor, there was no mark of death. With a fancy that the body might be miraculously living, sleeping, Thad thrust an arm out through the opened panel of his suit, and touched a slender, bare white arm. It was stiff, very cold.

The still, pallid face was framed in fine brown hair. The fair, small hands were crossed upon the breast, over the simple white garment.

A queer ache came into his heart. Something made him think of a white tower in the red hills near Helion, and a girl waiting in its fragrant garden of saffron and purple—a girl like this.

The body lay upon a bed of blazing jewels.

It appeared, Thad thought, as if the pile of gems upon the floor had been hastily scraped from the coffer, to make room for the quiet form. He wondered how long it had lain there. It looked as if it might have been living but minutes before. Some preservative....

His thought was broken by a sound that rang from the open hatchway on the deck above—the furious barking and yelping of the dog. Abruptly that was silent, and in its place came the uncanny and terrifying scream that Thad had heard once before, on this flier of mystery. A shriek so keen and shrill that it seemed to tear out his nerves by their roots. The voice of the haunter of the ship.

When Thad came back upon the deck, the dog was still barking nervously. He saw the animal forward, almost at the bow. Hackles raised, tail between its legs, it was slinking backward, barking sharply as if to call for aid.

Apparently it was retreating from something between Thad and itself. But

Thad, searching the dimly-lit deck, could see no source of alarm. Nor could the structures upon it have shut any large object from his view.

"It's all right!" Thad called, intending to reassure the frightened animal, but finding his voice queerly dry. "Coming on the double, old man. Don't worry."

The dog had reached the end of the deck. It stopped yelping, but snarled and whined as if in terror. It began darting back and forth, moving exactly as if something were slowly closing in upon it, trapping it in the corner. But Thad could see nothing.

Then it made a wild dash back toward Thad, darting along by the wall, as if trying to run past an unseen enemy.

Thad thought he heard quick, rasping footsteps, then, that were not those of the dog. And something seemed to catch the dog in mid-air, as it leaped. It was hurled howling to the deck. For a moment it struggled furiously, as if an invisible claw had pinned it down. Then it escaped, and fled whimpering to Thad's side.

He saw a new wound across its hips. Three long, parallel scratches, from which fresh red blood was trickling.

Regular scraping sounds came from the end of the deck, where no moving thing was to be seen—sounds such as might be made by the walking of feet with unsheathed claws. Something was coming back toward Thad. Something that was invisible!

Terror seized him, with the knowledge. He had nerved himself to face desperate men, or a savage animal. But an invisible being, that could creep upon him and strike unseen! It was incredible ... yet he had seen the dog knocked down, and the bleeding wound it had received.

His heart paused, then beat very quickly. For the moment he thought only blindly, of escape. He knew only an overpowering desire to hide, to conceal himself from the invisible thing. Had it been possible, he might have tried to leave the flier.

Beside him was one of the companionways amidships, giving access to a compartment of the vessel that he had not explored. He turned, leaped down the steps, with the terrified dog at his heels.

Below, he found himself in a short hall, dimly lighted. Several metal doors opened from it. He tried one at random. It gave. He sprang through, let the dog follow, closed and locked it.

Trying to listen, he leaned weakly against the door. The rushing of his breath, swift and regular. The loud hammer of his thudding heart. The dog's low whines. Then—unmistakable scraping sounds, outside.

The scratching of claws, Thad knew. Invisible claws!

He stood there, bracing the door with the weight of his body, holding the

welding arc ready in his hand. Several times the hinges creaked, and he felt a heavy pressure against the panels. But at last the scratching sounds ceased. He relaxed. The monster had withdrawn, at least for a time.

When he had time to think, the invisibility of the thing was not so incredible. The mounted creatures he had seen in the hold were evidence that the flier had visited some unknown planet, where weird life reigned. It was not beyond reason that such a planet should be inhabited by beings invisible to human sight.

Human vision, as he knew, utilizes only a tiny fraction of the spectrum. The creature must be largely transparent to visible light, as human flesh is radiolucent to hard X-rays. Quite possibly it could be seen by infra-red or ultra-violet light—evidently it was visible enough to the dog's eyes, with their different range of sensitivity.

Pushing the subject from his mind, he turned to survey the room into which he had burst. It had apparently been occupied by a woman. A frail blue silk dress and more intimate items of feminine wearing apparel were hanging above the berth. Two pairs of delicate black slippers stood neatly below it.

Across from him was a dressing table, with a large mirror above it. Combs, pins, jars of cosmetic cluttered it. And Thad saw upon it a little leather-bound book, locked, stamped on the back "Diary."

He crossed the room and picked up the little book, which smelled faintly of jasmine. Momentary shame overcame him at thus stealing the secrets of an unknown girl. Necessity, however, left him no choice but to seize any chance of learning more of this ship of mystery and her invisible haunter. He broke the flimsy fastening.

Linda Cross was the name written on the fly-leaf, in a firm, clear feminine hand. On the next page was the photograph, in color, of a girl, the brown-haired girl whose body Thad had discovered in the crystal coffer in the hold. Her eyes, he saw, had been blue. He thought she looked very lovely—like the waiting girl in his old dream of the silver tower in the red hills by Helion.

The diary, it appeared, had not been kept very devotedly. Most of the pages were blank.

One of the first entries, dated a year and a half before, told of a party that Linda had attended in San Francisco, and of her refusal to dance with a certain man, referred to as "Benny," because he had been unpleasantly insistent about wanting to marry her. It ended:

"Dad said to-night that we're going off in the Dragon again. All the way to Uranus, if the new fuel works as he expects. What a lark, to explore a few new worlds of our own! Dad says one of Uranus' moons is as large as Mercury. And Benny won't be proposing again soon!"

Turning on, Thad found other scattered entries, some of them dealing with

the preparation for the voyage, the start from San Francisco—and a huge bunch of flowers from "Benny," the long months of the trip through space, out past the orbit of Mars, above the meteor belt, across Jupiter's orbit, beyond the track of Saturn, which was the farthest point that rocket explorers had previously reached, and on to Uranus, where they could not land because of the unstable surface.

The remainder of the entries Thad found less frequent, shorter, bearing the mark of excitement: landing upon Titania, the third and largest satellite of Uranus; unearthly forests, sheltering strange and monstrous life; the hunting of weird creatures, and mounting them for museum specimens.

Then the discovery of a ruined city, whose remains indicated that it had been built by a lost race of intelligent, spiderlike things; the finding of a temple whose walls were of precious metals, containing a crystal chest filled with wondrous gems; the smelting of the metal into convenient ingots, and the transfer of the treasure to the hold.

The first sinister note there entered the diary:

"Some of the men say we shouldn't have disturbed the temple. Think it will bring us bad luck. Rubbish, of course. But one man did vanish while they were smelting the gold. Poor Mr. Tom James. I suppose he ventured away from the rest, and something caught him."

The few entries that followed were shorter, and showed increasing nervous tension. They recorded the departure from Titania, made almost as soon as the treasure was loaded. The last was made several weeks later. A dozen men had vanished from the crew, leaving only gouts of blood to hint the manner of their going. The last entry ran:

"Dad says I'm to stay in here to-day. Old dear, he's afraid the thing will get me—whatever it is. It's really serious. Two men taken from their berths last night. And not a trace. Some of them think it's a curse on the treasure. One of them swears he saw Dad's stuffed specimens moving about in the hold.

"Some terrible thing must have slipped aboard the flier, out of the jungle. That's what Dad and the captain think. Queer they can't find it. They've searched all over. Well...."

Musing and regretful, Thad turned back for another look at the smiling girl in the photograph.

What a tragedy her death had been! Reading the diary had made him like her. Her balance and humor. Her quiet affection for "Dad." The calm courage with which she seemed to have faced the creeping, lurking death that darkened the ship with its unescapable shadow.

How had her body come to be in the coffer, he wondered, when all the others were—gone? It had shown no marks of violence. She must have died of fear. No, her face had seemed too calm and peaceful for that. Had she chosen easy

death by some poison, rather than that other dreadful fate? Had her body been put in the chest to protect it, and the poison arrested decomposition?

Thad was still studying the picture, thoughtfully and sadly, when the dog, which had been silent, suddenly growled again, and retreated from the door, toward the corner of the room.

The invisible monster had returned. Thad heard its claws scratching across the door again. And he heard another dreadful sound—not the long, shrill scream that had so grated on his nerves before, but a short, sharp coughing or barking, a series of shrill, indescribable notes that could have been made by no beast he knew.

The decision to open the door cost a huge effort of Thad's will.

For hours he had waited, thinking desperately. And the thing outside the door had waited as patiently, scratching upon it from time to time, uttering those dreadful, shrill coughing cries.

Sooner or later, he would have to face the monster. Even if he could escape from the room and avoid it for a time, he would have to meet it in the end. And it might creep upon him while he slept.

To be sure, the issue of the combat was extremely doubtful. The monster, apparently, had succeeded in killing every man upon the flier, even though some of them had been armed. It must be large and very ferocious.

But Thad was not without hope. He still wore his Osprey-suit. The heavy fabric, made of metal wires impregnated with a tough, elastic composition, should afford considerable protection against the thing.

The welding arc, intended to fuse refractive meteoric iron, would be no mean weapon, at close quarters. And the quarters would be close.

If only he could find some way to make the thing visible!

Paint, or something of the kind, would stick to its skin.... His eyes, searching the room, caught the jar of face powder on the dressing table. Dash that over it! It ought to stick enough to make the outline visible.

So, at last, holding the powder ready in one hand, he waited until a time when the pressure upon the door had just relaxed, and he knew the monster was waiting outside. Swiftly, he opened the door....

Thad had partially overcome the instinctive horror that the unseen being had first aroused in him. But it returned in a sickening wave when he heard the short, shrill, coughing cries, hideously eager, that greeted the opening of the door. And the quick rasping of naked claws upon the floor. Sounds from nothingness!

He flung the powder at the sound.

A form of weird horror materialized before him, still half invisible, half outlined with the white film of adhering powder: gigantic and hideous claws, that

seemed to reach out of empty air, the side of a huge, scaly body, a yawning, dripping jaw. For a moment Thad could see great, hooked fangs in that jaw. Then they vanished, as if an unseen tongue had licked the powder from them, dissolving it in fluids which made it invisible.

That unearthly, half-seen shape leaped at him.

He was carried backward into the room, hurled to the floor. Claws were rasping upon the tough fabric of his suit. His arm was seized crushingly in half-visible jaws.

Desperately he clung to the welding tool. The heated electrode was driven toward his body. He fought to keep it away; he knew that it would burn through even the insulated fabric of his suit.

A claw ripped savagely at his side. He heard the sharp, rending sound, as the tough fabric of his suit was torn, and felt a thin pencil of pain drawn along his body, where a claw cut his skin.

Suddenly the suit was full of the earthy fetor of the monster's body, nauseatingly intense. Thad gasped, tried to hold his breath, and thrust upward hard with the incandescent electrode. He felt warm blood trickling from the wound.

A numbing blow struck his arm. The welding tool was carried from his hand. Flung to the side of the room, it clattered to the floor; and then a heavy weight came upon his chest, forcing the breath from his lungs. The monster stood upon his body and clawed at him.

Thad squirmed furiously. He kicked out with his feet, encountering a great, hard body. Futilely he beat and thrust with his arms against the pillarlike limb.

His body was being mauled, bruised beneath the thick fabric. He heard it tear again, along his right thigh. But he felt no pain, and thought the claws had not reached the skin.

It was the yellow dog that gave him the chance to recover the weapon. The animal had been running back and forth in the opposite end of the room, fairly howling in excitement and terror. Now, with the mad courage of desperation, it leaped recklessly at the monster.

A mighty, dimly seen claw caught it, hurled it back across the room. It lay still, broken, whimpering.

For a moment the thing had lifted its weight from Thad's body. And Thad slipped quickly from beneath it, flung himself across the room, snatched up the welding tool.

In an instant the creature was upon him again. But he met it with the incandescent electrode. He was crouched in a corner, now, where it could come at him from only one direction. Its claws still slashed at him ferociously. But he was able to cling to the weapon, and meet each onslaught with hot metal.

Gradually its mad attacks weakened. Then one of his blind, thrusting blows seemed to burn into a vital organ. A terrible choking, strangling sound came from the air. And he heard the thrashing struggles of wild convulsions. At last all was quiet. He prodded the thing again and again with the hot electrode, and it did not move. It was dead.

The creature's body was so heavy that Thad had to return to the bridge, and shut off the current in the gravity plates along the keel, before he could move it. He dragged it to the lock through which he had entered the flier, and consigned it to space....

Five days later Thad brought the Red Dragon into the atmosphere of Mars. A puzzled pilot came aboard, in response to his signals, and docked the flier safely at Helion. Thad went down into the hold again, with the astonished port authorities who had come aboard to inspect the vessel.

Again he passed among the grotesque and outrageous monsters in the hold, leading the gasping officers. While they marveled at the treasure, he lifted the weirdly embellished lid of the coffer of white crystal, and looked once more upon the still form of the girl within it.

Pity stirred him. An ache came in his throat.

Linda Cross, so quiet and cold and white, and yet so lovely. How terrible her last days of life must have been, with doom shadowing the vessel, and the men vanishing mysteriously, one by one! Terrible—until she had sought the security of death.

Strangely, Thad felt no great elation at the thought that half the incalculable treasure about him was now safely his own, as the award of salvage. If only the girl were still living.... He felt a poignantly keen desire to hear her voice.

Thad found the note when they started to lift her from the chest. A hasty scrawl, it lay beneath her head, among glittering gems.

"This woman is not dead. Please have her given skilled medical attention as soon as possible. She lies in a state of suspended animation, induced by the injection of fifty minims of zeronel.

"She is my daughter, Linda Cross, and my sole heir.

"I entreat the finders of this to have care given her, and to keep in trust for her such part of the treasure on this ship as may remain after the payment of salvage or other claims.

"Sometime she will wake. Perhaps in a year, perhaps in a hundred. The purity of my drugs is uncertain, and the injection was made hastily, so I do not know the exact time that must elapse.

"If this is found, it will be because the lurking thing upon the ship has destroyed me and all my men.

"Please do not fail me.

Levington Cross."

Thad bought the white tower of his dreams, slim and graceful in its Martian garden of saffron and purple, among the low ocher hills beside Helion. He carried the sleeping girl through the silver door where the girl of his dreams had waited, and set the coffer in a great, vaulted chamber. Many times each day he came into the room where she lay, to look into her pallid face, and feel her cold wrist. He kept a nurse in attendance, and had a physician call daily.

A long Martian year went by.

Looking in his mirror one day, Thad saw little wrinkles about his eyes. He realized that the nervous strain and anxiety of waiting was aging him. And it might be a hundred years, he remembered, before Linda Cross came from beneath the drug's influence.

He wondered if he should grow old and infirm, while Linda lay still young and beautiful and unchanged in her sleep; if she might awake, after long years, and see in him only a feeble old man. And he knew that he would not be sorry he had waited, even if he should die before she revived.

On the next day, the nurse called him into the room where Linda lay. He was bending over her when she opened her eyes. They were blue, glorious.

A long time she looked up at him, first in fearful wonder, then with confidence, and dawning understanding. And at last she smiled.

SECOND VARIETY

The claws were bad enough in the first place—nasty, crawling little death-robots. But when they began to imitate their creators, it was time for the human race to make peace—if it could!

The Russian soldier made his way nervously up the ragged side of the hill, holding his gun ready. He glanced around him, licking his dry lips, his face set. From time to time he reached up a gloved hand and wiped perspiration from his neck, pushing down his coat collar.

Eric turned to Corporal Leone. "Want him? Or can I have him?" He adjusted the view sight so the Russian's features squarely filled the glass, the lines cutting across his hard, somber features.

Leone considered. The Russian was close, moving rapidly, almost running. "Don't fire. Wait." Leone tensed. "I don't think we're needed."

The Russian increased his pace, kicking ash and piles of debris out of his way. He reached the top of the hill and stopped, panting, staring around him. The sky was overcast, drifting clouds of gray particles. Bare trunks of trees jutted up occasionally; the ground was level and bare, rubble-strewn, with the ruins of buildings standing out here and there like yellowing skulls.

The Russian was uneasy. He knew something was wrong. He started down the hill. Now he was only a few paces from the bunker. Eric was getting fidgety. He played with his pistol, glancing at Leone.

"Don't worry," Leone said. "He won't get here. They'll take care of him."

"Are you sure? He's got damn far."

"They hang around close to the bunker. He's getting into the bad part. Get set!"

The Russian began to hurry, sliding down the hill, his boots sinking into the heaps of gray ash, trying to keep his gun up. He stopped for a moment, lifting his fieldglasses to his face.

"He's looking right at us," Eric said.

The Russian came on. They could see his eyes, like two blue stones. His mouth was open a little. He needed a shave; his chin was stubbled. On one bony cheek was a square of tape, showing blue at the edge. A fungoid spot. His coat was muddy and torn. One glove was missing. As he ran his belt counter bounced up and down against him.

Leone touched Eric's arm. "Here one comes."

Across the ground something small and metallic came, flashing in the dull sunlight of mid-day. A metal sphere. It raced up the hill after the Russian, its treads flying. It was small, one of the baby ones. Its claws were out, two razor projections spinning in a blur of white steel. The Russian heard it. He turned instantly, firing. The sphere dissolved into particles. But already a second had emerged and was following the first. The Russian fired again.

A third sphere leaped up the Russian's leg, clicking and whirring. It jumped to the shoulder. The spinning blades disappeared into the Russian's throat.

Eric relaxed. "Well, that's that. God, those damn things give me the creeps. Sometimes I think we were better off before."

"If we hadn't invented them, they would have." Leone lit a cigarette shakily. "I wonder why a Russian would come all this way alone. I didn't see anyone covering him."

Lt. Scott came slipping up the tunnel, into the bunker. "What happened? Something entered the screen."

"An Ivan."

"Just one?"

Eric brought the view screen around. Scott peered into it. Now there were numerous metal spheres crawling over the prostrate body, dull metal globes clicking and whirring, sawing up the Russian into small parts to be carried away.

"What a lot of claws," Scott murmured.

"They come like flies. Not much game for them any more."

Scott pushed the sight away, disgusted. "Like flies. I wonder why he was out there. They know we have claws all around."

A larger robot had joined the smaller spheres. It was directing operations, a long blunt tube with projecting eyepieces. There was not much left of the soldier. What remained was being brought down the hillside by the host of claws.

"Sir," Leone said. "If it's all right, I'd like to go out there and take a look at him."

"Why?"

"Maybe he came with something."

Scott considered. He shrugged. "All right. But be careful."

"I have my tab." Leone patted the metal band at his wrist. "I'll be out of bounds."

He picked up his rifle and stepped carefully up to the mouth of the bunker, making his way between blocks of concrete and steel prongs, twisted and bent. The air was cold at the top. He crossed over the ground toward the remains of the soldier, striding across the soft ash. A wind blew around him, swirling gray particles up in his face. He squinted and pushed on.

The claws retreated as he came close, some of them stiffening into immobility. He touched his tab. The Ivan would have given something for that! Short hard radiation emitted from the tab neutralized the claws, put them out of commission. Even the big robot with its two waving eyestalks retreated respectfully as he approached.

He bent down over the remains of the soldier. The gloved hand was closed tightly. There was something in it. Leone pried the fingers apart. A sealed container, aluminum. Still shiny.

He put it in his pocket and made his way back to the bunker. Behind him the claws came back to life, moving into operation again. The procession resumed, metal spheres moving through the gray ash with their loads. He could hear their treads scrabbling against the ground. He shuddered.

Scott watched intently as he brought the shiny tube out of his pocket. "He had that?"

"In his hand." Leone unscrewed the top. "Maybe you should look at it, sir."

Scott took it. He emptied the contents out in the palm of his hand. A small piece of silk paper, carefully folded. He sat down by the light and unfolded it.

"What's it say, sir?" Eric said. Several officers came up the tunnel. Major Hendricks appeared.

"Major," Scott said. "Look at this."

Hendricks read the slip. "This just come?"

"A single runner. Just now."

"Where is he?" Hendricks asked sharply.

"The claws got him."

Major Hendricks grunted. "Here." He passed it to his companions. "I think this is what we've been waiting for. They certainly took their time about it."

"So they want to talk terms," Scott said. "Are we going along with them?"

"That's not for us to decide." Hendricks sat down. "Where's the communications officer? I want the Moon Base."

Leone pondered as the communications officer raised the outside antenna cautiously, scanning the sky above the bunker for any sign of a watching Russian ship.

"Sir," Scott said to Hendricks. "It's sure strange they suddenly came around. We've been using the claws for almost a year. Now all of a sudden they start to fold."

"Maybe claws have been getting down in their bunkers."

"One of the big ones, the kind with stalks, got into an Ivan bunker last week," Eric said. "It got a whole platoon of them before they got their lid shut."

"How do you know?"

"A buddy told me. The thing came back with—with remains."

"Moon Base, sir," the communications officer said.

On the screen the face of the lunar monitor appeared. His crisp uniform contrasted to the uniforms in the bunker. And he was clean shaven. "Moon Base."

"This is forward command L-Whistle. On Terra. Let me have General Thompson."

The monitor faded. Presently General Thompson's heavy features came into focus. "What is it, Major?"

"Our claws got a single Russian runner with a message. We don't know whether to act on it—there have been tricks like this in the past."

"What's the message?"

"The Russians want us to send a single officer on policy level over to their lines. For a conference. They don't state the nature of the conference. They say that matters of—" He consulted the slip. "—Matters of grave urgency make it advisable that discussion be opened between a representative of the UN forces and themselves."

He held the message up to the screen for the general to scan. Thompson's eyes moved.

"What should we do?" Hendricks said.

"Send a man out."

"You don't think it's a trap?"

"It might be. But the location they give for their forward command is correct. It's worth a try, at any rate."

"I'll send an officer out. And report the results to you as soon as he returns."

"All right, Major." Thompson broke the connection. The screen died. Up above, the antenna came slowly down.

Hendricks rolled up the paper, deep in thought.

"I'll go," Leone said.

"They want somebody at policy level." Hendricks rubbed his jaw. "Policy level. I haven't been outside in months. Maybe I could use a little air."

"Don't you think it's risky?"

Hendricks lifted the view sight and gazed into it. The remains of the Russian were gone. Only a single claw was in sight. It was folding itself back, disappearing into the ash, like a crab. Like some hideous metal crab....

"That's the only thing that bothers me." Hendricks rubbed his wrist. "I know I'm safe as long as I have this on me. But there's something about them. I hate the damn things. I wish we'd never invented them. There's something wrong with them. Relentless little—"

"If we hadn't invented them, the Ivans would have."

Hendricks pushed the sight back. "Anyhow, it seems to be winning the war. I guess that's good."

"Sounds like you're getting the same jitters as the Ivans." Hendricks examined his wrist watch. "I guess I had better get started, if I want to be there before dark."

He took a deep breath and then stepped out onto the gray, rubbled ground. After a minute he lit a cigarette and stood gazing around him. The landscape was dead. Nothing stirred. He could see for miles, endless ash and slag, ruins of buildings. A few trees without leaves or branches, only the trunks. Above him the eternal rolling clouds of gray, drifting between Terra and the sun.

Major Hendricks went on. Off to the right something scuttled, something round and metallic. A claw, going lickety-split after something. Probably after a small animal, a rat. They got rats, too. As a sort of sideline.

He came to the top of the little hill and lifted his fieldglasses. The Russian lines were a few miles ahead of him. They had a forward command post there. The runner had come from it.

A squat robot with undulating arms passed by him, its arms weaving inquiringly. The robot went on its way, disappearing under some debris. Hendricks watched it go. He had never seen that type before. There were getting to be more and more types he had never seen, new varieties and sizes coming up from the underground factories.

Hendricks put out his cigarette and hurried on. It was interesting, the use of artificial forms in warfare. How had they got started? Necessity. The Soviet Union had gained great initial success, usual with the side that got the war going. Most of North America had been blasted off the map. Retaliation was quick in coming, of course. The sky was full of circling disc-bombers long before the war began; they had been up there for years. The discs began sailing down all over Russia within hours after Washington got it.

But that hadn't helped Washington.

The American bloc governments moved to the Moon Base the first year. There was not much else to do. Europe was gone; a slag heap with dark weeds growing from the ashes and bones. Most of North America was useless; nothing

could be planted, no one could live. A few million people kept going up in Canada and down in South America. But during the second year Soviet parachutists began to drop, a few at first, then more and more. They wore the first really effective anti-radiation equipment; what was left of American production moved to the moon along with the governments.

All but the troops. The remaining troops stayed behind as best they could, a few thousand here, a platoon there. No one knew exactly where they were; they stayed where they could, moving around at night, hiding in ruins, in sewers, cellars, with the rats and snakes. It looked as if the Soviet Union had the war almost won. Except for a handful of projectiles fired off from the moon daily, there was almost no weapon in use against them. They came and went as they pleased. The war, for all practical purposes, was over. Nothing effective opposed them.

And then the first claws appeared. And overnight the complexion of the war changed.

The claws were awkward, at first. Slow. The Ivans knocked them off almost as fast as they crawled out of their underground tunnels. But then they got better, faster and more cunning. Factories, all on Terra, turned them out. Factories a long way under ground, behind the Soviet lines, factories that had once made atomic projectiles, now almost forgotten.

The claws got faster, and they got bigger. New types appeared, some with feelers, some that flew. There were a few jumping kinds.

The best technicians on the moon were working on designs, making them more and more intricate, more flexible. They became uncanny; the Ivans were having a lot of trouble with them. Some of the little claws were learning to hide themselves, burrowing down into the ash, lying in wait.

And then they started getting into the Russian bunkers, slipping down when the lids were raised for air and a look around. One claw inside a bunker, a churning sphere of blades and metal—that was enough. And when one got in others followed. With a weapon like that the war couldn't go on much longer.

Maybe it was already over.

Maybe he was going to hear the news. Maybe the Politburo had decided to throw in the sponge. Too bad it had taken so long. Six years. A long time for war like that, the way they had waged it. The automatic retaliation discs, spinning down all over Russia, hundreds of thousands of them. Bacteria crystals. The Soviet guided missiles, whistling through the air. The chain bombs. And now this, the robots, the claws—

The claws weren't like other weapons. They were alive, from any practical standpoint, whether the Governments wanted to admit it or not. They were not machines. They were living things, spinning, creeping, shaking themselves up suddenly from the gray ash and darting toward a man, climbing up him, rushing

for his throat. And that was what they had been designed to do. Their job.

They did their job well. Especially lately, with the new designs coming up. Now they repaired themselves. They were on their own. Radiation tabs protected the UN troops, but if a man lost his tab he was fair game for the claws, no matter what his uniform. Down below the surface automatic machinery stamped them out. Human beings stayed a long way off. It was too risky; nobody wanted to be around them. They were left to themselves. And they seemed to be doing all right. The new designs were faster, more complex. More efficient.

Apparently they had won the war.

Major Hendricks lit a second cigarette. The landscape depressed him. Nothing but ash and ruins. He seemed to be alone, the only living thing in the whole world. To the right the ruins of a town rose up, a few walls and heaps of debris. He tossed the dead match away, increasing his pace. Suddenly he stopped, jerking up his gun, his body tense. For a minute it looked like—

From behind the shell of a ruined building a figure came, walking slowly toward him, walking hesitantly.

Hendricks blinked. "Stop!"

The boy stopped. Hendricks lowered his gun. The boy stood silently, looking at him. He was small, not very old. Perhaps eight. But it was hard to tell. Most of the kids who remained were stunted. He wore a faded blue sweater, ragged with dirt, and short pants. His hair was long and matted. Brown hair. It hung over his face and around his ears. He held something in his arms.

"What's that you have?" Hendricks said sharply.

The boy held it out. It was a toy, a bear. A teddy bear. The boy's eyes were large, but without expression.

Hendricks relaxed. "I don't want it. Keep it."

The boy hugged the bear again.

"Where do you live?" Hendricks said.

"In there."

"The ruins?"

"Yes."

"Underground?"

"Yes."

"How many are there?"

"How—how many?"

"How many of you. How big's your settlement?"

The boy did not answer.

Hendricks frowned. "You're not all by yourself, are you?"

The boy nodded.

"How do you stay alive?"

"There's food."

"What kind of food?"

"Different."

Hendricks studied him. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

It wasn't possible. Or was it? The boy was thin, stunted. And probably sterile. Radiation exposure, years straight. No wonder he was so small. His arms and legs were like pipecleaners, knobby, and thin. Hendricks touched the boy's arm. His skin was dry and rough; radiation skin. He bent down, looking into the boy's face. There was no expression. Big eyes, big and dark.

"Are you blind?" Hendricks said.

"No. I can see some."

"How do you get away from the claws?"

"The claws?"

"The round things. That run and burrow."

"I don't understand."

Maybe there weren't any claws around. A lot of areas were free. They collected mostly around bunkers, where there were people. The claws had been designed to sense warmth, warmth of living things.

"You're lucky." Hendricks straightened up. "Well? Which way are you going? Back—back there?"

"Can I come with you?"

"With me?" Hendricks folded his arms. "I'm going a long way. Miles. I have to hurry." He looked at his watch. "I have to get there by nightfall."

"I want to come."

Hendricks fumbled in his pack. "It isn't worth it. Here." He tossed down the food cans he had with him. "You take these and go back. Okay?"

The boy said nothing.

"I'll be coming back this way. In a day or so. If you're around here when I come back you can come along with me. All right?"

"I want to go with you now."

"It's a long walk."

"I can walk."

Hendricks shifted uneasily. It made too good a target, two people walking along. And the boy would slow him down. But he might not come back this way. And if the boy were really all alone—

"Okay. Come along."

The boy fell in beside him. Hendricks strode along. The boy walked silently, clutching his teddy bear.

"What's your name?" Hendricks said, after a time.

"David Edward Derring."

"David? What—what happened to your mother and father?"

"They died."

"How?"

"In the blast."

"How long ago?"

"Six years."

Hendricks slowed down. "You've been alone six years?"

"No. There were other people for awhile. They went away."

"And you've been alone since?"

"Yes."

Hendricks glanced down. The boy was strange, saying very little. Withdrawn. But that was the way they were, the children who had survived. Quiet. Stoic. A strange kind of fatalism gripped them. Nothing came as a surprise. They accepted anything that came along. There was no longer any normal, any natural course of things, moral or physical, for them to expect. Custom, habit, all the determining forces of learning were gone; only brute experience remained.

"Am I walking too fast?" Hendricks said.

"No."

"How did you happen to see me?"

"I was waiting."

"Waiting?" Hendricks was puzzled. "What were you waiting for?"

"To catch things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things to eat."

"Oh." Hendricks set his lips grimly. A thirteen year old boy, living on rats and gophers and half-rotten canned food. Down in a hole under the ruins of a town. With radiation pools and claws, and Russian dive-mines up above, coasting around in the sky.

"Where are we going?" David asked.

"To the Russian lines."

"Russian?"

"The enemy. The people who started the war. They dropped the first radia-

tion bombs. They began all this.''

The boy nodded. His face showed no expression.

''I'm an American,'' Hendricks said.

There was no comment. On they went, the two of them, Hendricks walking a little ahead, David trailing behind him, hugging his dirty teddy bear against his chest.

About four in the afternoon they stopped to eat. Hendricks built a fire in a hollow between some slabs of concrete. He cleared the weeds away and heaped up bits of wood. The Russians' lines were not very far ahead. Around him was what had once been a long valley, acres of fruit trees and grapes. Nothing remained now but a few bleak stumps and the mountains that stretched across the horizon at the far end. And the clouds of rolling ash that blew and drifted with the wind, settling over the weeds and remains of buildings, walls here and there, once in awhile what had been a road.

Hendricks made coffee and heated up some boiled mutton and bread. ''Here.'' He handed bread and mutton to David. David squatted by the edge of the fire, his knees knobby and white. He examined the food and then passed it back, shaking his head.

''No.''

''No? Don't you want any?''

''No.''

Hendricks shrugged. Maybe the boy was a mutant, used to special food. It didn't matter. When he was hungry he would find something to eat. The boy was strange. But there were many strange changes coming over the world. Life was not the same, anymore. It would never be the same again. The human race was going to have to realize that.

''Suit yourself,'' Hendricks said. He ate the bread and mutton by himself, washing it down with coffee. He ate slowly, finding the food hard to digest. When he was done he got to his feet and stamped the fire out.

David rose slowly, watching him with his young-old eyes.

''We're going,'' Hendricks said.

''All right.''

Hendricks walked along, his gun in his arms. They were close; he was tense, ready for anything. The Russians should be expecting a runner, an answer to their own runner, but they were tricky. There was always the possibility of a slipup. He scanned the landscape around him. Nothing but slag and ash, a few hills, charred trees. Concrete walls. But someplace ahead was the first bunker of the Russian lines, the forward command. Underground, buried deep, with only a periscope showing, a few gun muzzles. Maybe an antenna.

"Will we be there soon?" David asked.

"Yes. Getting tired?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

David did not answer. He plodded carefully along behind, picking his way over the ash. His legs and shoes were gray with dust. His pinched face was streaked, lines of gray ash in riverlets down the pale white of his skin. There was no color to his face. Typical of the new children, growing up in cellars and sewers and underground shelters.

Hendricks slowed down. He lifted his fieldglasses and studied the ground ahead of him. Were they there, someplace, waiting for him? Watching him, the way his men had watched the Russian runner? A chill went up his back. Maybe they were getting their guns ready, preparing to fire, the way his men had prepared, made ready to kill.

Hendricks stopped, wiping perspiration from his face. "Damn." It made him uneasy. But he should be expected. The situation was different.

He strode over the ash, holding his gun tightly with both hands. Behind him came David. Hendricks peered around, tight-lipped. Any second it might happen. A burst of white light, a blast, carefully aimed from inside a deep concrete bunker.

He raised his arm and waved it around in a circle.

Nothing moved. To, the right a long ridge ran, topped with dead tree trunks. A few wild vines had grown, up around, the trees, remains of arbors. And the eternal dark weeds. Hendricks studied the ridge. Was anything up there? Perfect place for a lookout. He approached the ridge warily, David coming silently behind. If it were his command he'd have a sentry up there, watching for troops trying to infiltrate into the command area. Of course, if it were his command there would be the claws around the area for full protection.

He stopped, feet apart, hands on his hips.

"Are we there?" David said.

"Almost."

"Why have we stopped?"

"I don't want to take any chances." Hendricks advanced slowly. Now the ridge lay directly beside him, along his right. Overlooking him. His uneasy feeling increased. If an Ivan were up there he wouldn't have a chance. He waved his arm again. They should be expecting someone in the UN uniform, in response to the note capsule. Unless the whole thing was a trap.

"Keep up with me." He turned toward David. "Don't drop behind."

"With you?"

"Up beside me! We're close. We can't take any chances. Come on."

"I'll be all right." David remained behind him, in the rear, a few paces away, still clutching his teddy bear.

"Have it your way." Hendricks raised his glasses again, suddenly tense. For a moment—had something moved? He scanned the ridge carefully. Everything was silent. Dead. No life up there, only tree trunks and ash. Maybe a few rats. The big black rats that had survived the claws. Mutants—built their own shelters out of saliva and ash. Some kind of plaster. Adaptation. He started forward again.

A tall figure came out on the ridge above him, cloak flapping. Gray-green. A Russian. Behind him a second soldier appeared, another Russian. Both lifted their guns, aiming.

Hendricks froze. He opened his mouth. The soldiers were kneeling, sighting down the side of the slope. A third figure had joined them on the ridge top, a smaller figure in gray-green. A woman. She stood behind the other two.

Hendricks found his voice. "Stop!" He waved up at them frantically. "I'm.."

The two Russians fired. Behind Hendricks there was a faint pop. Waves of heat lapped against him, throwing him to the ground. Ash tore at his face, grinding into his eyes and nose. Choking, he pulled himself to his knees. It was all a trap. He was finished. He had come to be killed, like a steer. The soldiers and the woman were coming down the side of the ridge toward him, sliding down through the soft ash. Hendricks was numb. His head throbbed. Awkwardly, he got his rifle up and took aim. It weighed a thousand tons; he could hardly hold it. His nose and cheeks stung. The air was full of the blast smell, a bitter acrid stench.

"Don't fire," the first Russian said, in heavily accented English.

The three of them came up to him, surrounding him. "Put down your rifle, Yank," the other said.

Hendricks was dazed. Everything had happened so fast. He had been caught. And they had blasted the boy. He turned his head. David was gone. What remained of him was strewn across the ground.

The three Russians studied him curiously. Hendricks sat, wiping blood from his nose, picking out bits of ash. He shook his head, trying to clear it. "Why did you do it?" he murmured thickly. "The boy."

"Why?" One of the soldiers helped him roughly to his feet. He turned Hendricks around. "Look."

Hendricks closed his eyes.

"Look!" The two Russians pulled him forward. "See. Hurry up. There isn't much time to spare, Yank!"

Hendricks looked. And gasped.

"See now? Now do you understand?"

From the remains of David a metal wheel rolled. Relays, glinting metal. Parts, wiring. One of the Russians kicked at the heap of remains. Parts popped out, rolling away, wheels and springs and rods. A plastic section fell in, half charred. Hendricks bent shakily down. The front of the head had come off. He could make out the intricate brain, wires and relays, tiny tubes and switches, thousands of minute studs—

"A robot," the soldier holding his arm said. "We watched it tagging you."

"Tagging me?"

"That's their way. They tag along with you. Into the bunker. That's how they get in."

Hendricks blinked, dazed. "But—"

"Come on." They led him toward the ridge. "We can't stay here. It isn't safe. There must be hundreds of them all around here."

The three of them pulled him up the side of the ridge, sliding and slipping on the ash. The woman reached the top and stood waiting for them.

"The forward command," Hendricks muttered. "I came to negotiate with the Soviet—"

"There is no more forward command. They got in. We'll explain." They reached the top of the ridge. "We're all that's left. The three of us. The rest were down in the bunker."

"This way. Down this way." The woman unscrewed a lid, a gray manhole cover set in the ground. "Get in."

Hendricks lowered himself. The two soldiers and the woman came behind him, following him down the ladder. The woman closed the lid after them, bolting it tightly into place.

"Good thing we saw you," one of the two soldiers grunted. "It had tagged you about as far as it was going to."

"Give me one of your cigarettes," the woman said. "I haven't had an American cigarette for weeks."

Hendricks pushed the pack to her. She took a cigarette and passed the pack to the two soldiers. In the corner of the small room the lamp gleamed fitfully. The room was low-ceilinged, cramped. The four of them sat around a small wood table. A few dirty dishes were stacked to one side. Behind a ragged curtain a second room was partly visible. Hendricks saw the corner of a cot, some blankets, clothes hung on a hook.

"We were here," the soldier beside him said. He took, off his helmet, pushing his blond hair back. "I'm Corporal Rudi Maxer. Polish. Impressed in the So-

viet Army two years ago.'' He held out his hand.

Hendricks hesitated and then shook. ''Major Joseph Hendricks.''

''Klaus Epstein.'' The other soldier shook with him, a small dark man with thinning hair. Epstein plucked nervously at his ear. ''Austrian. Impressed God knows when. I don't remember. The three of us were here, Rudi and I, with Tasso.'' He indicated the woman. ''That's how we escaped. All the rest were down in the bunker.''

''And—and they got in?''

Epstein lit a cigarette. ''First just one of them. The kind that tagged you. Then it let others in.''

Hendricks became alert. ''The kind? Are there more than one kind?''

''The little boy. David. David holding his teddy bear. That's Variety Three. The most effective.''

''What are the other types?''

Epstein reached into his coat. ''Here.'' He tossed a packet of photographs onto the table, tied with a string. ''Look for yourself.''

Hendricks untied the string.

''You see,'' Rudi Maxer said, ''that was why we wanted to talk terms. The Russians, I mean. We found out about a week ago. Found out that your claws were beginning to make up new designs on their own. New types of their own. Better types. Down in your underground factories behind our lines. You let them stamp themselves, repair themselves. Made them more and more intricate. It's your fault this happened.''

Hendricks examined the photos. They had been snapped hurriedly; they were blurred and indistinct. The first few showed—David. David walking along a road, by himself. David and another David. Three Davids. All exactly alike. Each with a ragged teddy bear.

All pathetic.

''Look at the others,'' Tasso said.

The next pictures, taken at a great distance, showed a towering wounded soldier sitting by the side of a path, his arm in a sling, the stump of one leg extended, a crude crutch on his lap. Then two wounded soldiers, both the same, standing side by side.

''That's Variety One. The Wounded Soldier.'' Klaus reached out and took the pictures. ''You see, the claws were designed to get to human beings. To find them. Each kind was better than the last. They got farther, closer, past most of our defenses, into our lines. But as long as they were merely machines, metal spheres with claws and horns, feelers, they could be picked off like any other object. They could be detected as lethal robots as soon as they were seen. Once we caught

sight of them—''

''Variety One subverted our whole north wing,'' Rudi said. ''It was a long time before anyone caught on. Then it was too late. They came in, wounded soldiers, knocking and begging to be let in. So we let them in. And as soon as they were in they took over. We were watching out for machines....''

''At that time it was thought there was only the one type,'' Klaus Epstein said. ''No one suspected there were other types. The pictures were flashed to us. When the runner was sent to you, we knew of just one type. Variety One. The big Wounded Soldier. We thought that was all.''

''Your line fell to—''

''To Variety Three. David and his bear. That worked even better.'' Klaus smiled bitterly. ''Soldiers are suckers for children. We brought them in and tried to feed them. We found out the hard way what they were after. At least, those who were in the bunker.''

''The three of us were lucky,'' Rudi said. ''Klaus and I were—were visiting Tasso when it happened. This is her place.'' He waved a big hand around. ''This little cellar. We finished and climbed the ladder to start back. From the ridge we saw. There they were, all around the bunker. Fighting was still going on. David and his bear. Hundreds of them. Klaus took the pictures.''

Klaus tied up the photographs again.

''And it's going on all along your line?'' Hendricks said.

''Yes.''

''How about our lines?'' Without thinking, he touched the tab on his arm. ''Can they—''

''They're not bothered by your radiation tabs. It makes no difference to them, Russian, American, Pole, German. It's all the same. They're doing what they were designed to do. Carrying out the original idea. They track down life, wherever they find it.''

''They go by warmth,'' Klaus said. ''That was the way you constructed them from the very start. Of course, those you designed were kept back by the radiation tabs you wear. Now they've got around that. These new varieties are leadlined.''

''What's the other variety?'' Hendricks asked. ''The David type, the Wounded Soldier—what's the other?''

''We don't know.'' Klaus pointed up at the wall. On the wall were two metal plates, ragged at the edges. Hendricks got up and studied them. They were bent and dented.

''The one on the left came off a Wounded Soldier,'' Rudi said. ''We got one of them. It was going along toward our old bunker. We got it from the ridge, the

same way we got the David tagging you.''

The plate was stamped: I-V. Hendricks touched the other plate. ''And this came from the David type?''

''Yes.'' The plate was stamped: III-V.

Klaus took a look at them, leaning over Hendricks' broad shoulder. ''You can see what we're up against. There's another type. Maybe it was abandoned. Maybe it didn't work. But there must be a Second Variety. There's One and Three.''

''You were lucky,'' Rudi said. ''The David tagged you all the way here and never touched you. Probably thought you'd get it into a bunker, somewhere.''

''One gets in and it's all over,'' Klaus said. ''They move fast. One lets all the rest inside. They're inflexible. Machines with one purpose. They were built for only one thing.'' He rubbed sweat from his lip. ''We saw.''

They were silent.

''Let me have another cigarette, Yank,'' Tasso said. ''They are good. I almost forgot how they were.''

It was night. The sky was black. No stars were visible through the rolling clouds of ash. Klaus lifted the lid cautiously so that Hendricks could look out.

Rudi pointed into the darkness. ''Over that way are the bunkers. Where we used to be. Not over half a mile from us. It was just chance Klaus and I were not there when it happened. Weakness. Saved by our lusts.''

''All the rest must be dead,'' Klaus said in a low voice. ''It came quickly. This morning the Politburo reached their decision. They notified us—forward command. Our runner was sent out at once. We saw him start toward the direction of your lines. We covered him until he was out of sight.''

''Alex Radrivsky. We both knew him. He disappeared about six o'clock. The sun had just come up. About noon Klaus and I had an hour relief. We crept off, away from the bunkers. No one was watching. We came here. There used to be a town here, a few houses, a street. This cellar was part of a big farmhouse. We knew Tasso would be here, hiding down in her little place. We had come here before. Others from the bunkers came here. Today happened to be our turn.''

''So we were saved,'' Klaus said. ''Chance. It might have been others. We—we finished, and then we came up to the surface and started back along the ridge. That was when we saw them, the Davids. We understood right away. We had seen the photos of the First Variety, the Wounded Soldier. Our Commissar distributed them to us with an explanation. If we had gone another step they would have seen us. As it was we had to blast two Davids before we got back. There were hundreds of them, all around. Like ants. We took pictures and slipped back here, bolting the lid tight.''

''They're not so much when you catch them alone. We moved faster than

they did. But they're inexorable. Not like living things. They came right at us. And we blasted them."

Major Hendricks rested against the edge of the lid, adjusting his eyes to the darkness. "Is it safe to have the lid up at all?"

"If we're careful. How else can you operate your transmitter?"

Hendricks lifted the small belt transmitter slowly. He pressed it against his ear. The metal was cold and damp. He blew against the mike, raising up the short antenna. A faint hum sounded in his ear. "That's true, I suppose."

But he still hesitated.

"We'll pull you under if anything happens," Klaus said.

"Thanks." Hendricks waited a moment, resting the transmitter against his shoulder. "Interesting, isn't it?"

"What?"

"This, the new types. The new varieties of claws. We're completely at their mercy, aren't we? By now they've probably gotten into the UN lines, too. It makes me wonder if we're not seeing the beginning of a now species. The new species. Evolution. The race to come after man."

Rudi grunted. "There is no race after man."

"No? Why not? Maybe we're seeing it now the end of human beings, the beginning of the new society."

"They're not a race. They're mechanical killers. You made them to destroy. That's all they can do. They're machines with a job."

"So it seems now. But how about later on? After the war is over. Maybe, when there aren't any humans to destroy, their real potentialities will begin to show."

"You talk as if they were alive!"

"Aren't they?"

There was silence. "They're machines," Rudi said. "They look like people, but they're machines."

"Use your transmitter, Major," Klaus said. "We can't stay up here forever."

Holding the transmitter tightly Hendricks called the code of the command bunker. He waited, listening. No response. Only silence. He checked the leads carefully. Everything was in place.

"Scott!" he said into the mike. "Can you hear me?"

Silence. He raised the gain up full and tried again. Only static.

"I don't get anything. They may hear me but they may not want to answer."

"Tell them it's an emergency."

"They'll think I'm being forced to call. Under your direction." He tried again,

outlining briefly what he had learned. But still the phone was silent, except for the faint static.

"Radiation pools kill most transmission," Klaus said, after awhile. "Maybe that's it."

Hendricks shut the transmitter up. "No use. No answer. Radiation pools? Maybe. Or they hear me, but won't answer. Frankly, that's what I would do, if a runner tried to call from the Soviet lines. They have no reason to believe such a story. They may hear everything I say—"

"Or maybe it's too late."

Hendricks nodded.

"We better get the lid down," Rudi said nervously. "We don't want to take unnecessary chances."

They climbed slowly back down the tunnel. Klaus bolted the lid carefully into place. They descended into the kitchen. The air was heavy and close around them.

"Could they work that fast?" Hendricks said. "I left the bunker this noon. Ten hours ago. How could they move so quickly?"

"It doesn't take them long. Not after the first one gets in. It goes wild. You know what the little claws can do. Even one of these is beyond belief. Razors, each finger. Maniacal."

"All right." Hendricks moved away impatiently. He stood with his back to them.

"What's the matter?" Rudi said.

"The Moon Base. God, if they've gotten there—"

"The Moon Base?"

Hendricks turned around. "They couldn't have got to the Moon Base. How would they get there? It isn't possible. I can't believe it."

"What is this Moon Base? We've heard rumors, but nothing definite. What is the actual situation? You seem concerned."

"We're supplied from the moon. The governments are there, under the lunar surface. All our people and industries. That's what keeps us going. If they should find some way of getting off Terra, onto the moon—"

"It only takes one of them. Once the first one gets in it admits the others. Hundreds of them, all alike. You should have seen them. Identical. Like ants."

"Perfect socialism," Tasso said. "The ideal of the communist state. All citizens interchangeable."

Klaus grunted angrily. "That's enough. Well? What next?"

Hendricks paced back and forth, around the small room. The air was full of

smells of food and perspiration. The others watched him. Presently Tasso pushed through the curtain, into the other room. "I'm going to take a nap."

The curtain closed behind her. Rudi and Klaus sat down at the table, still Watching Hendricks.

"It's up to you," Klaus said. "We don't know your situation."

Hendricks nodded.

"It's a problem." Rudi drank some coffee, filling his cup from a rusty pot. "We're safe here for awhile, but we can't stay here forever. Not enough food or supplies."

"But if we go outside—"

"If we go outside they'll get us. Or probably they'll get us. We couldn't go very far. How far is your command bunker, Major?"

"Three or four miles."

"We might make it. The four of us. Four of us could watch all sides. They couldn't slip up behind us and start tagging us. We have three rifles, three blast rifles. Tasso can have my pistol." Rudi tapped his belt. "In the Soviet army we didn't have shoes always, but we had guns. With all four of us armed one of us might get to your command bunker. Preferably you, Major."

"What if they're already there?" Klaus said.

Rudi shrugged. "Well, then we come back here."

Hendricks stopped pacing. "What do you think the chances are they're already in the American lines?"

"Hard to say. Fairly good. They're organized. They know exactly what they're doing. Once they start they go like a horde of locusts. They have to keep moving, and fast. It's secrecy and speed they depend on. Surprise. They push their way in before anyone has any idea."

"I see," Hendricks murmured.

From the other room Tasso stirred. "Major?"

Hendricks pushed the curtain back. "What?"

Tasso looked up at him lazily from the cot. "Have you any more American cigarettes left?"

Hendricks went into the room and sat down across from her, on a wood stool. He felt in his pockets. "No. All gone."

"Too bad."

"What nationality are you?" Hendricks asked after awhile.

"Russian."

"How did you get here?"

"Here?"

"This used to be France. This was part of Normandy. Did you come with the Soviet army?"

"Why?"

"Just curious." He studied her. She had taken off her coat, tossing it over the end of the cot. She was young, about twenty. Slim. Her long hair stretched out over the pillow. She was staring at him silently, her eyes dark and large.

"What's on your mind?" Tasso said.

"Nothing. How old are you?"

"Eighteen." She continued to watch him, unblinking, her arms behind her head. She had on Russian army pants and shirt. Gray-green. Thick leather belt with counter and cartridges. Medicine kit.

"You're in the Soviet army?"

"No."

"Where did you get the uniform?"

She shrugged. "It was given to me," she told him.

"How—how old were you when you came here?"

"Sixteen."

"That young?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Hendricks rubbed his jaw. "Your life would have been a lot different if there had been no war. Sixteen. You came here at sixteen. To live this way."

"I had to survive."

"I'm not moralizing."

"Your life would have been different, too," Tasso murmured. She reached down and unfastened one of her boots. She kicked the boot off, onto the floor. "Major, do you want to go in the other room? I'm sleepy."

"It's going to be a problem, the four of us here. It's going to be hard to live in these quarters. Are there just the two rooms?"

"Yes."

"How big was the cellar originally? Was it larger than this? Are there other rooms filled up with debris? We might be able to open one of them."

"Perhaps. I really don't know." Tasso loosened her belt. She made herself comfortable on the cot, unbuttoning her shirt. "You're sure you have no more cigarettes?"

"I had only the one pack."

"Too bad. Maybe if we get back to your bunker we can find some." The other boot fell. Tasso reached up for the light cord. "Good night."

"You're going to sleep?"

"That's right."

The room plunged into darkness. Hendricks got up and made his way past the curtain, into the kitchen.

And stopped, rigid.

Rudi stood against the wall, his face white and gleaming. His mouth opened and closed but no sounds came. Klaus stood in front of him, the muzzle of his pistol in Rudi's stomach. Neither of them moved. Klaus, his hand tight around his gun, his features set. Rudi, pale and silent, spread-eagled against the wall.

"What—" Hendricks muttered, but Klaus cut him off.

"Be quiet, Major. Come over here. Your gun. Get out your gun."

Hendricks drew his pistol. "What is it?"

"Cover him." Klaus motioned him forward. "Beside me. Hurry!"

Rudi moved a little, lowering his arms. He turned to Hendricks, licking his lips. The whites of his eyes shone wildly. Sweat dripped from his forehead, down his cheeks. He fixed his gaze on Hendricks. "Major, he's gone insane. Stop him." Rudi's voice was thin and hoarse, almost inaudible.

"What's going on?" Hendricks demanded.

Without lowering his pistol Klaus answered. "Major, remember our discussion? The Three Varieties? We knew about One and Three. But we didn't know about Two. At least, we didn't know before." Klaus' fingers tightened around the gun butt. "We didn't know before, but we know now."

He pressed the trigger. A burst of white heat rolled out of the gun, licking around Rudi.

"Major, this is the Second Variety."

Tasso swept the curtain aside. "Klaus! What did you do?"

Klaus turned from the charred form, gradually sinking down the wall onto the floor. "The Second Variety, Tasso. Now we know. We have all three types identified. The danger is less. I—"

Tasso stared past him at the remains of Rudi, at the blackened, smouldering fragments and bits of cloth. "You killed him."

"Him? It, you mean. I was watching. I had a feeling, but I wasn't sure. At least, I wasn't sure before. But this evening I was certain." Klaus rubbed his pistol butt nervously. "We're lucky. Don't you understand? Another hour and it might.."

"You were certain?" Tasso pushed past him and bent down, over the steaming remains on the floor. Her face became hard. "Major, see for yourself. Bones. Flesh."

Hendricks bent down beside her. The remains were human remains. Seared flesh, charred bone fragments, part of a skull. Ligaments, viscera, blood. Blood forming a pool against the wall.

"No wheels," Tasso said calmly. She straightened up. "No wheels, no parts, no relays. Not a claw. Not the Second Variety." She folded her arms. "You're going to have to be able to explain this."

Klaus sat down at the table, all the color drained suddenly from his face. He put his head in his hands and rocked back and forth.

"Snap out of it." Tasso's fingers closed over his shoulder. "Why did you do it? Why did you kill him?"

"He was frightened," Hendricks said. "All this, the whole thing, building up around us."

"Maybe."

"What, then? What do you think?"

"I think he may have had a reason for killing Rudi. A good reason."

"What reason?"

"Maybe Rudi learned something."

Hendricks studied her bleak face. "About what?" he asked.

"About him. About Klaus."

Klaus looked up quickly. "You can see what she's trying to say. She thinks I'm the Second Variety. Don't you see, Major? Now she wants you to believe I killed him on purpose. That I'm—"

"Why did you kill him, then?" Tasso said.

"I told you." Klaus shook his head wearily. "I thought he was a claw. I thought I knew."

"Why?"

"I had been watching him. I was suspicious."

"Why?"

"I thought I had seen something. Heard something. I thought I—" He stopped.

"Go on."

"We were sitting at the table. Playing cards. You two were in the other room. It was silent. I thought I heard him—whirr."

There was silence.

"Do you believe that?" Tasso said to Hendricks.

"Yes. I believe what he says."

"I don't. I think he killed Rudi for a good purpose." Tasso touched the rifle, resting in the corner of the room. "Major—"

"No." Hendricks shook his head. "Let's stop it right now. One is enough. We're afraid, the way he was. If we kill him we'll be doing what he did to Rudi."

Klaus looked gratefully up at him. "Thanks. I was afraid. You understand,

don't you? Now she's afraid, the way I was. She wants to kill me."

"No more killing." Hendricks moved toward the end of the ladder. "I'm going above and try the transmitter once more. If I can't get them we're moving back toward my lines tomorrow morning."

Klaus rose quickly. "I'll come up with you and give you a hand."

The night air was cold. The earth was cooling off. Klaus took a deep breath, filling his lungs. He and Hendricks stepped onto the ground, out of the tunnel. Klaus planted his feet wide apart, the rifle up, watching and listening. Hendricks crouched by the tunnel mouth, tuning the small transmitter.

"Any luck?" Klaus asked presently.

"Not yet."

"Keep trying. Tell them what happened."

Hendricks kept trying. Without success. Finally he lowered the antenna. "It's useless. They can't hear me. Or they hear me and won't answer. Or—"

"Or they don't exist."

"I'll try once more." Hendricks raised the antenna. "Scott, can you hear me? Come in!"

He listened. There was only static. Then, still very faintly—

"This is Scott."

His fingers tightened. "Scott! Is it you?"

"This is Scott."

Klaus squatted down. "Is it your command?"

"Scott, listen. Do you understand? About them, the claws. Did you get my message? Did you hear me?"

"Yes." Faintly. Almost inaudible. He could hardly make out the word.

"You got my message? Is everything all right at the bunker? None of them have got in?"

"Everything is all right."

"Have they tried to get in?"

The voice was weaker.

"No."

Hendricks turned to Klaus. "They're all right."

"Have they been attacked?"

"No." Hendricks pressed the phone tighter to his ear. "Scott, I can hardly hear you. Have you notified the Moon Base? Do they know? Are they alerted?"

No answer.

"Scott! Can you hear me?"

Silence.

Hendricks relaxed, sagging. "Faded out. Must be radiation pools."

Hendricks and Klaus looked at each other. Neither of them said anything. After a time Klaus said, "Did it sound like any of your men? Could you identify the voice?"

"It was too faint."

"You couldn't be certain?"

"No."

"Then it could have been—"

"I don't know. Now I'm not sure. Let's go back down and get the lid closed."

They climbed back down the ladder slowly, into the warm cellar. Klaus bolted the lid behind them. Tasso waited for them, her face expressionless.

"Any luck?" she asked.

Neither of them answered. "Well?" Klaus said at last. "What do you think, Major? Was it your officer, or was it one of them?"

"I don't know."

"Then we're just where we were before."

Hendricks stared down at the floor, his jaw set. "We'll have to go. To be sure."

"Anyhow, we have food here for only a few weeks. We'd have to go up after that, in any case."

"Apparently so."

"What's wrong?" Tasso demanded. "Did you get across to your bunker? What's the matter?"

"It may have been one of my men," Hendricks said slowly. "Or it may have been one of them. But we'll never know standing here." He examined his watch. "Let's turn in and get some sleep. We want to be up early tomorrow."

"Early?"

"Our best chance to get through the claws should be early in the morning," Hendricks said.

The morning was crisp and clear. Major Hendricks studied the countryside through his fieldglasses.

"See anything?" Klaus said.

"No."

"Can you make out our bunkers?"

"Which way?"

"Here." Klaus took the glasses and adjusted them. "I know where to look." He looked a long time, silently.

Tasso came to the top of the tunnel and stepped up onto the ground. "Anything?"

"No." Klaus passed the glasses back to Hendricks. "They're out of sight. Come on. Let's not stay here."

The three of them made their way down the side of the ridge, sliding in the soft ash. Across a flat rock a lizard scuttled. They stopped instantly, rigid.

"What was it?" Klaus muttered.

"A lizard."

The lizard ran on, hurrying through the ash. It was exactly the same color as the ash.

"Perfect adaptation," Klaus said. "Proves we were right. Lysenko, I mean."

They reached the bottom of the ridge and stopped, standing close together, looking around them.

"Let's go." Hendricks started off. "It's a good long trip, on foot."

Klaus fell in beside him. Tasso walked behind, her pistol held alertly. "Major, I've been meaning to ask you something," Klaus said. "How did you run across the David? The one that was tagging you."

"I met it along the way. In some ruins."

"What did it say?"

"Not much. It said it was alone. By itself."

"You couldn't tell it was a machine? It talked like a living person? You never suspected?"

"It didn't say much. I noticed nothing unusual.

"It's strange, machines so much like people that you can be fooled. Almost alive. I wonder where it'll end."

"They're doing what you Yanks designed them to do," Tasso said. "You designed them to hunt out life and destroy. Human life. Wherever they find it."

Hendricks was watching Klaus intently. "Why did you ask me? What's on your mind?"

"Nothing," Klaus answered.

"Klaus thinks you're the Second Variety," Tasso said calmly, from behind them. "Now he's got his eye on you."

Klaus flushed. "Why not? We sent a runner to the Yank lines and he comes back. Maybe he thought he'd find some good game here."

Hendricks laughed harshly. "I came from the UN bunkers. There were human beings all around me."

"Maybe you saw an opportunity to get into the Soviet lines. Maybe you saw your chance. Maybe you—"

"The Soviet lines had already been taken over. Your lines had been invaded before I left my command bunker. Don't forget that."

Tasso came up beside him. "That proves nothing at all, Major."

"Why not?"

"There appears to be little communication between the varieties. Each is made in a different factory. They don't seem to work together. You might have started for the Soviet lines without knowing anything about the work of the other varieties. Or even what the other varieties were like."

"How do you know so much about the claws?" Hendricks said.

"I've seen them. I've observed them. I observed them take over the Soviet bunkers."

"You know quite a lot," Klaus said. "Actually, you saw very little. Strange that you should have been such an acute observer."

Tasso laughed. "Do you suspect me, now?"

"Forget it," Hendricks said. They walked on in silence.

"Are we going the whole way on foot?" Tasso said, after awhile. "I'm not used to walking." She gazed around at the plain of ash, stretching out on all sides of them, as far as they could see. "How dreary."

"It's like this all the way," Klaus said.

"In a way I wish you had been in your bunker when the attack came."

"Somebody else would have been with you, if not me," Klaus muttered.

Tasso laughed, putting her hands in her pockets. "I suppose so."

They walked on, keeping their eyes on the vast plain of silent ash around them.

The sun was setting. Hendricks made his way forward slowly, waving Tasso and Klaus back. Klaus squatted down, resting his gun butt against the ground.

Tasso found a concrete slab and sat down with a sigh. "It's good to rest."

"Be quiet," Klaus said sharply.

Hendricks pushed up to the top of the rise ahead of them. The same rise the Russian runner had come up, the day before. Hendricks dropped down, stretching himself out, peering through his glasses at what lay beyond.

Nothing was visible. Only ash and occasional trees. But there, not more than fifty yards ahead, was the entrance of the forward command bunker. The bunker from which he had come. Hendricks watched silently. No motion. No sign of life. Nothing stirred.

Klaus slithered up beside him. "Where is it?"

"Down there." Hendricks passed him the glasses. Clouds of ash rolled across the evening sky. The world was darkening. They had a couple of hours of light

left, at the most. Probably not that much.

"I don't see anything," Klaus said.

"That tree there. The stump. By the pile of bricks. The entrance is to the right of the bricks."

"I'll have to take your word for it."

"You and Tasso cover me from here. You'll be able to sight all the way to the bunker entrance."

"You're going down alone?"

"With my wrist tab I'll be safe. The ground around the bunker is a living field of claws. They collect down in the ash. Like crabs. Without tabs you wouldn't have a chance."

"Maybe you're right."

"I'll walk slowly all the way. As soon as I know for certain—"

"If they're down inside the bunker you won't be able to get back up here. They go fast. You don't realize."

"What do you suggest?"

Klaus considered. "I don't know. Get them to come up to the surface. So you can see."

Hendricks brought his transmitter from his belt, raising the antenna. "Let's get started."

Klaus signalled to Tasso. She crawled expertly up the side of the rise to where they were sitting.

"He's going down alone," Klaus said. "We'll cover him from here. As soon as you see him start back, fire past him at once. They come quick."

"You're not very optimistic," Tasso said.

"No, I'm not."

Hendricks opened the breech of his gun, checking it carefully. "Maybe things are all right."

"You didn't see them. Hundreds of them. All the same. Pouring out like ants."

"I should be able to find out without going down all the way." Hendricks locked his gun, gripping it in one hand, the transmitter in the other. "Well, wish me luck."

Klaus put out his hand. "Don't go down until you're sure. Talk to them from up here. Make them show themselves."

Hendricks stood up. He stepped down the side of the rise.

A moment later he was walking slowly toward the pile of bricks and debris beside the dead tree stump. Toward the entrance of the forward command bunker.

Nothing stirred. He raised the transmitter, clicking it on. "Scott? Can you hear me?"

Silence.

"Scott! This is Hendricks. Can you hear me? I'm standing outside the bunker. You should be able to see me in the view sight."

He listened, the transmitter gripped tightly. No sound. Only static. He walked forward. A claw burrowed out of the ash and raced toward him. It halted a few feet away and then slunk off. A second claw appeared, one of the big ones with feelers. It moved toward him, studied him intently, and then fell in behind him, dogging respectfully after him, a few paces away. A moment later a second big claw joined it. Silently, the claws trailed him, as he walked slowly toward the bunker.

Hendricks stopped, and behind him, the claws came to a halt. He was close, now. Almost to the bunker steps.

"Scott! Can you hear me? I'm standing right above you. Outside. On the surface. Are you picking me up?"

He waited, holding his gun against his side, the transmitter tightly to his ear. Time passed. He strained to hear, but there was only silence. Silence, and faint static.

Then, distantly, metallically—

"This is Scott."

The voice was neutral. Cold. He could not identify it. But the earphone was minute.

"Scott! Listen. I'm standing right above you. I'm on the surface, looking down into the bunker entrance."

"Yes."

"Can you see me?"

"Yes."

"Through the view sight? You have the sight trained on me?"

"Yes."

Hendricks pondered. A circle of claws waited quietly around him, gray-metal bodies on all sides of him. "Is everything all right in the bunker? Nothing unusual has happened?"

"Everything is all right."

"Will you come up to the surface? I want to see you for a moment." Hendricks took a deep breath. "Come up here with me. I want to talk to you."

"Come down."

"I'm giving you an order."

Silence.

"Are you coming?" Hendricks listened. There was no response. "I order you to come to the surface."

"Come down."

Hendricks set his jaw. "Let me talk to Leone."

There was a long pause. He listened to the static. Then a voice came, hard, thin, metallic. The same as the other. "This is Leone."

"Hendricks. I'm on the surface. At the bunker entrance. I want one of you to come up here."

"Come down."

"Why come down? I'm giving you an order!"

Silence. Hendricks lowered the transmitter. He looked carefully around him. The entrance was just ahead. Almost at his feet. He lowered the antenna and fastened the transmitter to his belt. Carefully, he gripped his gun with both hands. He moved forward, a step at a time. If they could see him they knew he was starting toward the entrance. He closed his eyes a moment.

Then he put his foot on the first step that led downward.

Two Davids came up at him, their faces identical and expressionless. He blasted them into particles. More came rushing silently up, a whole pack of them. All exactly the same.

Hendricks turned and raced back, away from the bunker, back toward the rise.

At the top of the rise Tasso and Klaus were firing down. The small claws were already streaking up toward them, shining metal spheres going fast, racing frantically through the ash. But he had no time to think about that. He knelt down, aiming at the bunker entrance, gun against his cheek. The Davids were coming out in groups, clutching their teddy bears, their thin knobby legs pumping as they ran up the steps to the surface. Hendricks fired into the main body of them. They burst apart, wheels and springs flying in all directions. He fired again through the mist of particles.

A giant lumbering figure rose up in the bunker entrance, tall and swaying. Hendricks paused, amazed. A man, a soldier. With one leg, supporting himself with a crutch.

"Major!" Tasso's voice came. More firing. The huge figure moved forward, Davids swarming around it. Hendricks broke out of his freeze. The First Variety. The Wounded Soldier.

He aimed and fired. The soldier burst into bits, parts and relays flying. Now many Davids were out on the flat ground, away from the bunker. He fired again and again, moving slowly back, half-crouching and aiming.

From the rise, Klaus fired down. The side of the rise was alive with claws

making their way up. Hendricks retreated toward the rise, running and crouching. Tasso had left Klaus and was circling slowly to the right, moving away from the rise.

A David slipped up toward him, its small white face expressionless, brown hair hanging down in its eyes. It bent over suddenly, opening its arms. Its teddy bear hurtled down and leaped across the ground, bounding toward him. Hendricks fired. The bear and the David both dissolved. He grinned, blinking. It was like a dream.

"Up here!" Tasso's voice. Hendricks made his way toward her. She was over by some columns of concrete, walls of a ruined building. She was firing past him, with the hand pistol Klaus had given her.

"Thanks." He joined her, grasping for breath. She pulled him back, behind the concrete, fumbling at her belt.

"Close your eyes!" She unfastened a globe from her waist. Rapidly, she unscrewed the cap, locking it into place. "Close your eyes and get down."

She threw the bomb. It sailed in an arc, an expert, rolling and bouncing to the entrance of the bunker. Two Wounded Soldiers stood uncertainly by the brick pile. More Davids poured from behind them, out onto the plain. One of the Wounded Soldiers moved toward the bomb, stooping awkwardly down to pick it up.

The bomb went off. The concussion whirled Hendricks around, throwing him on his face. A hot wind rolled over him. Dimly he saw Tasso standing behind the columns, firing slowly and methodically at the Davids coming out of the raging clouds of white fire.

Back along the rise Klaus struggled with a ring of claws circling around him. He retreated, blasting at them and moving back, trying to break through the ring.

Hendricks struggled to his feet. His head ached. He could hardly see. Everything was licking at him, raging and whirling. His right arm would not move.

Tasso pulled back toward him. "Come on. Let's go."

"Klaus—He's still up there."

"Come on!" Tasso dragged Hendricks back, away from the columns. Hendricks shook his head, trying to clear it. Tasso led him rapidly away, her eyes intense and bright, watching for claws that had escaped the blast.

One David came out of the rolling clouds of flame. Tasso blasted it. No more appeared.

"But Klaus. What about him?" Hendricks stopped, standing unsteadily. "He.."

"Come on!"

They retreated, moving farther and farther away from the bunker. A few small claws followed them for a little while and then gave up, turning back and

going off.

At last Tasso stopped. "We can stop here and get our breaths."

Hendricks sat down on some heaps of debris. He wiped his neck, gasping. "We left Klaus back there."

Tasso said nothing. She opened her gun, sliding a fresh round of blast cartridges into place.

Hendricks stared at her, dazed. "You left him back there on purpose."

Tasso snapped the gun together. She studied the heaps of rubble around them, her face expressionless. As if she were watching for something.

"What is it?" Hendricks demanded. "What are you looking for? Is something coming?" He shook his head, trying to understand. What was she doing? What was she waiting for? He could see nothing. Ash lay all around them, ash and ruins. Occasional stark tree trunks, without leaves or branches. "What—"

Tasso cut him off. "Be still." Her eyes narrowed. Suddenly her gun came up. Hendricks turned, following her gaze.

Back the way they had come a figure appeared. The figure walked unsteadily toward them. Its clothes were torn. It limped as it made its way along, going very slowly and carefully. Stopping now and then, resting and getting its strength. Once it almost fell. It stood for a moment, trying to steady itself. Then it came on.

Klaus.

Hendricks stood up. "Klaus!" He started toward him. "How the hell did you.."

Tasso fired. Hendricks swung back. She fired again, the blast passing him, a searing line of heat. The beam caught Klaus in the chest. He exploded, gears and wheels flying. For a moment he continued to walk. Then he swayed back and forth. He crashed to the ground, his arms flung out. A few more wheels rolled away.

Silence.

Tasso turned to Hendricks. "Now you understand why he killed Rudi."

Hendricks sat down again slowly. He shook his head. He was numb. He could not think.

"Do you see?" Tasso said. "Do you understand?"

Hendricks said nothing. Everything was slipping away from him, faster and faster. Darkness, rolling and plucking at him.

He closed his eyes.

Hendricks opened his eyes slowly. His body ached all over. He tried to sit up but needles of pain shot through his arm and shoulder. He gasped.

"Don't try to get up," Tasso said. She bent down, putting her cold hand against his forehead.

It was night. A few stars glinted above, shining through the drifting clouds of ash. Hendricks lay back, his teeth locked. Tasso watched him impassively. She had built a fire with some wood and weeds. The fire licked feebly, hissing at a metal cup suspended over it. Everything was silent. Unmoving darkness, beyond the fire.

"So he was the Second Variety," Hendricks murmured.

"I had always thought so."

"Why didn't you destroy him sooner?" she wanted to know.

"You held me back." Tasso crossed to the fire to look into the metal cup. "Coffee. It'll be ready to drink in awhile."

She came back and sat down beside him. Presently she opened her pistol and began to disassemble the firing mechanism, studying it intently.

"This is a beautiful gun," Tasso said, half-aloud. "The construction is superb."

"What about them? The claws."

"The concussion from the bomb put most of them out of action. They're delicate. Highly organized, I suppose."

"The Davids, too?"

"Yes."

"How did you happen to have a bomb like that?"

Tasso shrugged. "We designed it. You shouldn't underestimate our technology, Major. Without such a bomb you and I would no longer exist."

"Very useful."

Tasso stretched out her legs, warming her feet in the heat of the fire. "It surprised me that you did not seem to understand, after he killed Rudi. Why did you think he—"

"I told you. I thought he was afraid."

"Really? You know, Major, for a little while I suspected you. Because you wouldn't let me kill him. I thought you might be protecting him." She laughed.

"Are we safe here?" Hendricks asked presently.

"For awhile. Until they get reinforcements from some other area." Tasso began to clean the interior of the gun with a bit of rag. She finished and pushed the mechanism back into place. She closed the gun, running her finger along the barrel.

"We were lucky," Hendricks murmured.

"Yes. Very lucky."

"Thanks for pulling me away."

Tasso did not answer. She glanced up at him, her eyes bright in the fire

light. Hendricks examined his arm. He could not move his fingers. His whole side seemed numb. Down inside him was a dull steady ache.

"How do you feel?" Tasso asked.

"My arm is damaged."

"Anything else?"

"Internal injuries."

"You didn't get down when the bomb went off."

Hendricks said nothing. He watched Tasso pour the coffee from the cup into a flat metal pan. She brought it over to him.

"Thanks." He Struggled up enough to drink. It was hard to swallow. His insides turned over and he pushed the pan away. "That's all I can drink now."

Tasso drank the rest. Time passed. The clouds of ash moved across the dark sky above them. Hendricks rested, his mind blank. After awhile he became aware that Tasso was standing over him, gazing down at him.

"What is it?" he murmured.

"Do you feel any better?"

"Some."

"You know, Major, if I hadn't dragged you away they would have got you. You would be dead. Like Rudi."

"I know."

"Do you want to know why I brought you out? I could have left you. I could have left you there."

"Why did you bring me out?"

"Because we have to get away from here." Tasso stirred the fire with a stick, peering calmly down into it. "No human being can live here. When their reinforcements come we won't have a chance. I've pondered about it while you were unconscious. We have perhaps three hours before they come."

"And you expect me to get us away?"

"That's right. I expect you to get us out of here."

"Why me?"

"Because I don't know any way." Her eyes shone at him in the half-light, bright and steady. "If you can't get us out of here they'll kill us within three hours. I see nothing else ahead. Well, Major? What are you going to do? I've been waiting all night. While you were unconscious I sat here, waiting and listening. It's almost dawn. The night is almost over."

Hendricks considered. "It's curious," he said at last.

"Curious?"

"That you should think I can get us out of here. I wonder what you think I can

do.''

''Can you get us to the Moon Base?''

''The Moon Base? How?''

''There must be some way.''

Hendricks shook his head. ''No. There's no way that I know of.''

Tasso said nothing. For a moment her steady gaze wavered. She ducked her head, turning abruptly away. She scrambled to her feet. ''More coffee?''

''No.''

''Suit yourself.'' Tasso drank silently. He could not see her face. He lay back against the ground, deep in thought, trying to concentrate. It was hard to think. His head still hurt. And the numbing daze still hung over him.

''There might be one way,'' he said suddenly.

''Oh?''

''How soon is dawn?''

''Two hours. The sun will be coming up shortly.''

''There's supposed to be a ship near here. I've never seen it. But I know it exists.''

''What kind of a ship?'' Her voice was sharp.

''A rocket cruiser.''

''Will it take us off? To the Moon Base?''

''It's supposed to. In case of emergency.'' He rubbed his forehead.

''What's wrong?''

''My head. It's hard to think. I can hardly—hardly concentrate. The bomb.''

''Is the ship near here?'' Tasso slid over beside him, settling down on her haunches. ''How far is it? Where is it?''

''I'm trying to think.''

Her fingers dug into his arm. ''Nearby?'' Her voice was like iron. ''Where would it be? Would they store it underground? Hidden underground?''

''Yes. In a storage locker.''

''How do we find it? Is it marked? Is there a code marker to identify it?''

Hendricks concentrated. ''No. No markings. No code symbol.''

''What, then?''

''A sign.''

''What sort of sign?''

Hendricks did not answer. In the flickering light his eyes were glazed, two sightless orbs. Tasso's fingers dug into his arm.

''What sort of sign? What is it?''

"I—I can't think. Let me rest."

"All right." She let go and stood up. Hendricks lay back against the ground, his eyes closed. Tasso walked away from him, her hands in her pockets. She kicked a rock out of her way and stood staring up at the sky. The night blackness was already beginning to fade into gray. Morning was coming.

Tasso gripped her pistol and walked around the fire in a circle, back and forth. On the ground Major Hendricks lay, his eyes closed, unmoving. The grayness rose in the sky, higher and higher. The landscape became visible, fields of ash stretching out in all directions. Ash and ruins of buildings, a wall here and there, heaps of concrete, the naked trunk of a tree.

The air was cold and sharp. Somewhere a long way off a bird made a few bleak sounds.

Hendricks stirred. He opened his eyes. "Is it dawn? Already?"

"Yes."

Hendricks sat up a little. "You wanted to know something. You were asking me."

"Do you remember now?"

"Yes."

"What is it?" She tensed. "What?" she repeated sharply.

"A well. A ruined well. It's in a storage locker under a well."

"A well." Tasso relaxed. "Then we'll find a well." She looked at her watch. "We have about an hour, Major. Do you think we can find it in an hour?"

"Give me a hand up," Hendricks said.

Tasso put her pistol away and helped him to his feet. "This is going to be difficult."

"Yes it is." Hendricks set his lips tightly. "I don't think we're going to go very far."

They began to walk. The early sun cast a little warmth down on them. The land was flat and barren, stretching out gray and lifeless as far as they could see. A few birds sailed silently, far above them, circling slowly.

"See anything?" Hendricks said. "Any claws?"

"No. Not yet."

They passed through some ruins, upright concrete and bricks. A cement foundation. Rats scuttled away. Tasso jumped back warily.

"This used to be a town," Hendricks said. "A village. Provincial village. This was all grape country, once. Where we are now."

They came onto a ruined street, weeds and cracks criss-crossing it. Over to the right a stone chimney stuck up.

"Be careful," he warned her.

A pit yawned, an open basement. Ragged ends of pipes jutted up, twisted and bent. They passed part of a house, a bathtub turned on its side. A broken chair. A few spoons and bits of china dishes. In the center of the street the ground had sunk away. The depression was filled with weeds and debris and bones.

"Over here," Hendricks murmured.

"This way?"

"To the right."

They passed the remains of a heavy duty tank. Hendricks' belt counter clicked ominously. The tank had been radiation blasted. A few feet from the tank a mummified body lay sprawled out, mouth open. Beyond the road was a flat field. Stones and weeds, and bits of broken glass.

"There," Hendricks said.

A stone well jutted up, sagging and broken. A few boards lay across it. Most of the well had sunk into rubble. Hendricks walked unsteadily toward it, Tasso beside him.

"Are you certain about this?" Tasso said. "This doesn't look like anything."

"I'm sure." Hendricks sat down at the edge of the well, his teeth locked. His breath came quickly. He wiped perspiration from his face. "This was arranged so the senior command officer could get away. If anything happened. If the bunker fell."

"That was you?"

"Yes."

"Where is the ship? Is it here?"

"We're standing on it." Hendricks ran his hands over the surface of the well stones. "The eye-lock responds to me, not to anybody else. It's my ship. Or it was supposed to be."

There was a sharp click. Presently they heard a low grating sound from below them.

"Step back," Hendricks said. He and Tasso moved away from the well.

A section of the ground slid back. A metal frame pushed slowly up through the ash, shoving bricks and weeds out of the way. The action ceased, as the ship nosed into view.

"There it is," Hendricks said.

The ship was small. It rested quietly, suspended in its mesh frame, like a blunt needle. A rain of ash sifted down into the dark cavity from which the ship had been raised. Hendricks made his way over to it. He mounted the mesh and unscrewed the hatch, pulling it back. Inside the ship the control banks and the pressure seat were visible.

Tasso came and stood beside him, gazing into the ship. "I'm not accustomed to rocket piloting," she said, after awhile.

Hendricks glanced at her. "I'll do the piloting."

"Will you? There's only one seat, Major. I can see it's built to carry only a single person."

Hendricks' breathing changed. He studied the interior of the ship intently. Tasso was right. There was only one seat. The ship was built to carry only one person. "I see," he said slowly. "And the one person is you."

She nodded.

"Of course."

"Why?"

"You can't go. You might not live through the trip. You're injured. You probably wouldn't get there."

"An interesting point. But you see, I know where the Moon Base is. And you don't. You might fly around for months and not find it. It's well hidden. Without knowing what to look for—"

"I'll have to take my chances. Maybe I won't find it. Not by myself. But I think you'll give me all the information I need. Your life depends on it."

"How?"

"If I find the Moon Base in time, perhaps I can get them to send a ship back to pick you up. If I find the Base in time. If not, then you haven't a chance. I imagine there are supplies on the ship. They will last me long enough—"

Hendricks moved quickly. But his injured arm betrayed him. Tasso ducked, sliding lithely aside. Her hand came up, lightning fast. Hendricks saw the gun butt coming. He tried to ward off the blow, but she was too fast. The metal butt struck against the side of his head, just above his ear. Numbing pain rushed through him. Pain and rolling clouds of blackness. He sank down, sliding to the ground.

Dimly, he was aware that Tasso was standing over him, kicking him with her toe.

"Major! Wake up."

He opened his eyes, groaning.

"Listen to me." She bent down, the gun pointed at his face. "I have to hurry. There isn't much time left. The ship is ready to go, but you must tell me the information I need before I leave."

Hendricks shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Hurry up! Where is the Moon Base? How do I find it? What do I look for?"

Hendricks said nothing.

"Answer me!"

"Sorry."

"Major, the ship is loaded with provisions. I can coast for weeks. I'll find the Base eventually. And in a half hour you'll be dead. Your only chance of survival—" She broke off.

Along the slope, by some crumbling ruins, something moved. Something in the ash. Tasso turned quickly, aiming. She fired. A puff of flame leaped. Something scuttled away, rolling across the ash. She fired again. The claw burst apart, wheels flying.

"See?" Tasso said. "A scout. It won't be long."

"You'll bring them back here to get me?"

"Yes. As soon as possible."

Hendricks looked up at her. He studied her intently. "You're telling the truth?" A strange expression had come over his face, an avid hunger. "You will come back for me? You'll get me to the Moon Base?"

"I'll get you to the Moon Base. But tell me where it is! There's only a little time left."

"All right." Hendricks picked up a piece of rock, pulling himself to a sitting position. "Watch."

Hendricks began to scratch in the ash. Tasso stood by him, watching the motion of the rock. Hendricks was sketching a crude lunar map.

"This is the Appenine range. Here is the Crater of Archimedes. The Moon Base is beyond the end of the Appenine, about two hundred miles. I don't know exactly where. No one on Terra knows. But when you're over the Appenine, signal with one red flare and a green flare, followed by two red flares in quick succession. The Base monitor will record your signal. The Base is under the surface, of course. They'll guide you down with magnetic grapples."

"And the controls? Can I operate them?"

"The controls are virtually automatic. All you have to do is give the right signal at the right time."

"I will."

"The seat absorbs most of the take-off shock. Air and temperature are automatically controlled. The ship will leave Terra and pass out into free space. It'll line itself up with the moon, falling into an orbit around it, about a hundred miles above the surface. The orbit will carry you over the Base. When you're in the region of the Appenine, release the signal rockets."

Tasso slid into the ship and lowered herself into the pressure seat. The arm locks folded automatically around her. She fingered the controls. "Too bad you're not going, Major. All this put here for you, and you can't make the trip."

"Leave me the pistol."

Tasso pulled the pistol from her belt. She held it in her hand, weighing it thoughtfully. "Don't go too far from this location. It'll be hard to find you, as it is."

"No. I'll stay here by the well."

Tasso gripped the take-off switch, running her fingers over the smooth metal. "A beautiful ship, Major. Well built. I admire your workmanship. You people have always done good work. You build fine things. Your work, your creations, are your greatest achievement."

"Give me the pistol," Hendricks said impatiently, holding out his hand. He struggled to his feet.

"Good-bye, Major." Tasso tossed the pistol past Hendricks. The pistol clattered against the ground, bouncing and rolling away. Hendricks hurried after it. He bent down, snatching it up.

The hatch of the ship clanged shut. The bolts fell into place. Hendricks made his way back. The inner door was being sealed. He raised the pistol unsteadily.

There was a shattering roar. The ship burst up from its metal cage, fusing the mesh behind it. Hendricks cringed, pulling back. The ship shot up into the rolling clouds of ash, disappearing into the sky.

Hendricks stood watching a long time, until even the streamer had dissipated. Nothing stirred. The morning air was chill and silent. He began to walk aimlessly back the way they had come. Better to keep moving around. It would be a long time before help came—if it came at all.

He searched his pockets until he found a package of cigarettes. He lit one grimly. They had all wanted cigarettes from him. But cigarettes were scarce.

A lizard slithered by him, through the ash. He halted, rigid. The lizard disappeared. Above, the sun rose higher in the sky. Some flies landed on a flat rock to one side of him. Hendricks kicked at them with his foot.

It was getting hot. Sweat trickled down his face, into his collar. His mouth was dry.

Presently he stopped walking and sat down on some debris. He unfastened his medicine kit and swallowed a few narcotic capsules. He looked around him. Where was he?

Something lay ahead. Stretched out on the ground. Silent and unmoving.

Hendricks drew his gun quickly. It looked like a man. Then he remembered. It was the remains of Klaus. The Second Variety. Where Tasso had blasted him. He could see wheels and relays and metal parts, strewn around on the ash. Glittering and sparkling in the sunlight.

Hendricks got to his feet and walked over. He nudged the inert form with his foot, turning it over a little. He could see the metal hull, the aluminum ribs and

struts. More wiring fell out. Like viscera. Heaps of wiring, switches and relays. Endless motors and rods.

He bent down. The brain cage had been smashed by the fall. The artificial brain was visible. He gazed at it. A maze of circuits. Miniature tubes. Wires as fine as hair. He touched the brain cage. It swung aside. The type plate was visible. Hendricks studied the plate.

And blanched.

IV—IV.

For a long time he stared at the plate. Fourth Variety. Not the Second. They had been wrong. There were more types. Not just three. Many more, perhaps. At least four. And Klaus wasn't the Second Variety.

But if Klaus wasn't the Second Variety—

Suddenly he tensed. Something was coming, walking through the ash beyond the hill. What was it? He strained to see. Figures. Figures coming slowly along, making their way through the ash.

Coming toward him.

Hendricks crouched quickly, raising his gun. Sweat dripped down into his eyes. He fought down rising panic, as the figures neared.

The first was a David. The David saw him and increased its pace. The others hurried behind it. A second David. A third. Three Davids, all alike, coming toward him silently, without expression, their thin legs rising and falling. Clutching their teddy bears.

He aimed and fired. The first two Davids dissolved into particles. The third came on. And the figure behind it. Climbing silently toward him across the gray ash. A Wounded Soldier, towering over the David. And—

And behind the Wounded Soldier came two Tassos, walking side by side. Heavy belt, Russian army pants, shirt, long hair. The familiar figure, as he had seen her only a little while before. Sitting in the pressure seat of the ship. Two slim, silent figures, both identical.

They were very near. The David bent down suddenly, dropping its teddy bear. The bear raced across the ground. Automatically, Hendricks' fingers tightened around the trigger. The bear was gone, dissolved into mist. The two Tasso Types moved on, expressionless, walking side by side, through the gray ash.

When they were almost to him, Hendricks raised the pistol waist high and fired.

The two Tassos dissolved. But already a new group was starting up the rise, five or six Tassos, all identical, a line of them coming rapidly toward him.

And he had given her the ship and the signal code. Because of him she was on her way to the moon, to the Moon Base. He had made it possible.

He had been right about the bomb, after all. It had been designed with knowledge of the other types, the David Type and the Wounded Soldier Type. And the Klaus Type. Not designed by human beings. It had been designed by one of the underground factories, apart from all human contact.

The line of Tassos came up to him. Hendricks braced himself, watching them calmly. The familiar face, the belt, the heavy shirt, the bomb carefully in place.

The bomb—

As the Tassos reached for him, a last ironic thought drifted through Hendricks' mind. He felt a little better, thinking about it. The bomb. Made by the Second Variety to destroy the other varieties. Made for that end alone.

They were already beginning to design weapons to use against each other.

SECURITY

In a world where Security is all-important, nothing can ever be secure. A mountain-climbing vacation may wind up in deep Space. Or loyalty may prove to be high treason. But it has its rewards.

It had been a tough day at the lab, one of those days when nothing seems able to go right. And, of course, it had been precisely the day Hammond, the Efficiency inspector, would choose to stick his nose in. Another mark in his little notebook—and enough marks like that meant a derating, and Control had a habit of sending derated labmen to Venus. That wasn't a criminal punishment, but it amounted to the same thing. Allen Lancaster had no fear of it for himself; the sector chief of a Project was under direct Control jurisdiction rather than Efficiency, and Control was friendly to him. But he'd hate to see young Rogers get it—the boy had been married only a week now.

To top the day off, a report had come to Lancaster's desk from Sector Seven of the Project. Security had finally cleared it for general transmission to sector chiefs—and it was the complete design of an electronic valve on which some of the best men in Lancaster's own division, Sector Thirteen, had been sweating for six months. There went half a year's work down the drain, all for nothing, and Lancaster would have that much less to show at the next Project reckoning.

He had cursed for several minutes straight, drawing the admiring glances of his assistants. It was safe enough for a high-ranking labman to gripe about Security—in fact, it was more or less expected. Scientists had their privileges.

One of these was a private three-room apartment. Another was an extra liquor ration. Tonight, as he came home, Lancaster decided to make a dent in the latter. He'd eaten at the commissary, as usual, but hadn't stayed to talk. All the way home in the tube, he'd been thinking of that whiskey and soda.

Now it sparkled gently in his glass and he sighed, letting a smile crease his lean homely face. He was a tall man, a little stooped, his clothes—uniform and mufti alike—perpetually rumpled. Solitary by nature, he was still unmarried in

spite of the bachelor tax and had only one son. The boy was ten years old now, must be in the Youth Guard; Lancaster wasn't sure, never having seen him.

It was dark outside his windows, but a glow above the walls across the skyway told of the city pulsing and murmuring beyond. He liked the quiet of his evenings alone and had withstood a good deal of personal and official pressure to serve in various patriotic organizations. "Damn it," he had explained, "I'm not doing routine work. I'm on a Project, and I need relaxation of my own choosing."

He selected a tape from his library. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* lilted joyously about him as he found a chair and sat down. Control hadn't gotten around to making approved lists of music yet, though you'd surely never hear Mozart in a public place. Lancaster got a cigar from the humidor and collapsed his long gaunt body across chair and hassock. Smoke, whiskey, good music—they washed his mind clean of worry and frustration; he drifted off in a mist of unformed dreams. Yes, it wasn't such a bad world.

The mail-tube went *ping!* and he opened his eyes, swearing. For a moment he was tempted to let the pneumo-roll lie where it fell, but habit was too strong. He grumbled his way over to the basket and took it out.

The stamp across it jerked his mind to wakefulness. *OfiSal, sEkret, fOr adresE OnlE*—and a Security seal!

After a moment he swallowed his thumping heart. It couldn't be serious, not as far as he personally was concerned anyway. If that had been the case, a squad of monitors would have been at the door. Not this message tube.... He broke the seal and unfolded the flimsy with elaborate care. Slowly, he scanned it. Underneath the official letterhead, the words were curt. "*Dis iz A matr uv urjensE and iz top sEkret. destrY Dis letr and Du tUb kontAniN it.* tUmOrO, 15 jUn, at 2130 ourz, U wil gO tU Du obzurvatOrE, A nIt klub at 5730 viktOrE strEt, and ask Du hedwAtr fOr A mistr Berg. U wil asUm Dat hE iz an Old frend uv yOrz and Dat Dis iz A sOSal EveniN. Du UZUal penaltEz ar invOkt fOr fAlUr tU komplI."

There was no signature. Lancaster stood for a moment, trying to imagine what this might be. There was a brief chill of sweat on his skin. Then he suppressed his emotions. He had nothing to fear. His record was clean and he wasn't being arrested.

His mind wandered rebelliously off on something that had occurred to him before. Admittedly the new phonetic orthography was more efficient than the old, if less esthetic; but since little of the earlier literature was being re-issued in modern spelling not too many books had actually been condemned as subversive—only a few works on history, politics, philosophy, and the like, together with some scientific texts restricted for security reasons; but one by one, the great old writings were sent to forgetfulness.

Well, these were critical times. There wasn't material and energy to spare

for irrelevant details. No doubt when complete peace was achieved there would be a renaissance. Meanwhile he, Lancaster, had his Euripides and Goethe and whatever else he liked, or knew where to borrow it.

As for this message, they must want him for something big, maybe something really interesting.

Nevertheless, his evening was ruined.

The Observatory was like most approved recreation spots—large and raucous, selling unrationed food and drink and amusement at uncontrolled prices of which the government took its usual lion's share. The angle in this place was astronomy. The ceiling was a blue haze a-glitter with slowly wheeling constellations, and the strippers began with make-believe spacesuits. There were some rather good murals on the walls depicting various stages of the conquest of space. Lancaster was amused at one of them. When he'd been here three years ago, the first landing on Ganymede had shown a group of men unfurling a German flag. It had stuck in his mind, because he happened to know that the first expedition there had actually been Russian. That was all right then, seeing that Germany was an ally at the time. But now that Europe was growing increasingly cold to the idea of an American-dominated world, the Ganymedean pioneers were holding a good safe Stars and Stripes.

Oh, well. You had to keep the masses happy. They couldn't see that their sacrifices and the occasional short wars were necessary to prevent another real smashup like the one seventy-five years ago. Lancaster's annoyance was directed at the sullen foreign powers and the traitors within his own land. It was because of them that science had to be strait-jacketed by Security regulations.

The headwaiter bowed before him. "I'm looking for a friend," said Lancaster. "A Mr. Berg."

"Yes, sir. This way, please."

Lancaster slouched after him. He'd worn the dress uniform of a Project officer, but he felt that all eyes were on its deplorable sloppiness. The headwaiter conducted him between tables of half-crocked customers—burly black-uniformed Space Guardsmen, army and air officers, richly clad industrialists and union bosses, civilian leaders, their wives and mistresses. The waiters were all Martian slaves, he noticed, their phosphorescent owl-eyes smoldering in the dim blue light.

He was ushered into a curtained booth. There was an auto-dispenser so that those using it need not be interrupted by servants, and an ultrasonic globe on the table was already vibrating to soundproof the region. Lancaster's gaze went to the man sitting there. In spite of being short, he was broad-shouldered and compact in plain gray evening pajamas. His face was round and freckled, almost cherubic, under a shock of sandy hair, but there were merry little devils in his eyes.

"Good evening, Dr. Lancaster," he said. "Please sit down. What'll you have?"

"Thanks, I'll have Scotch and soda." Might as well make this expensive, if the government was footing the bill. And if this—Berg—thought him un-American for drinking an imported beverage, what of it? The scientist lowered himself into the seat opposite his host.

"I'm having the same, as a matter of fact," said Berg mildly. He twirled the dial and slipped a couple of five-dollar coins into the dispenser slot. When the tray was ejected, he sipped his drink appreciatively and looked across the rim of the glass at the other man.

"You're a high-ranking physicist on the Arizona Project, aren't you, Dr. Lancaster?" he asked.

That much was safe to admit. Lancaster nodded.

"What is your work, precisely?"

"You know I can't tell you anything like that."

"It's all right. Here are my credentials." Berg extended a wallet. Lancaster scanned the cards and handed them back.

"Okay, so you're in Security," he said. "I still can't tell you anything, not without proper clearance."

Berg chuckled amiably. "Good. I'm glad to see you're discreet. Too many labmen don't understand the necessity of secrecy, even between different branches of the same organization." With a sudden whip-like sharpness: "You didn't tell anyone about this meeting, did you?"

"No, of course not." Despite himself, Lancaster was rattled. "That is, a friend asked if I'd care to go out with her tonight, but I said I was meeting someone else."

"That's right." Berg relaxed, smiling. "All right, we may as well get down to business. You're getting quite an honor, Dr. Lancaster. You've been tapped for one of the most important jobs in the Solar System."

"Eh?" Lancaster's eyes widened behind the contact lenses. "But no one else has informed me—"

"No one of your acquaintance knows of this. Nor shall they. But tell me, you've done work on dielectrics, haven't you?"

"Yes. It's been a sort of specialty of mine, in fact. I wrote my thesis on the theory of dielectric polarization and since then—no, that's classified."

"M-hm." Berg took another sip of his drink. "And right now you're just a cog in a computer-development Project. You see, I do know a few things about you. However, we've decided—higher up, you know, in fact on the very top level—to take you off it for the time being and put you on this other job, one concerning your specialty. Furthermore, you won't be part of a great organizational machine, but very much on your own. The fewer who know of this, the better."

Lancaster wasn't sure he liked that. Once the job was done—if he were possessed of all information on it—he might be incarcerated or even shot as a Security risk. Things like that had happened. But there wasn't much he could do about it.

"Have no fears." Berg seemed to read his thoughts. "Your reward may be a little delayed for Security reasons, but it will come in due time." He leaned forward, earnestly. "I repeat, this project is *top secret*. It's a vital link in something much bigger than you can imagine, and few men below the President even know of it. Therefore, the very fact that you've worked on it—that you've done any outside work at all—must remain unknown, even to the chiefs of your Project."

"Good stunt if you can do it," shrugged Lancaster. "But I'm hot. Security keeps tabs on everything I do."

"This is how we'll work it. You have a furlough coming up in two weeks, don't you—a three months' furlough? Where were you going?"

"I thought I'd visit the Southwest. Get in some mountain climbing, see the canyons and Indian ruins and—"

"Yes, yes. Very well. You'll get your ticket as usual and a reservation at the Tycho Hotel in Phoenix. You'll go there and, on your first evening, retire early. Alone, I need hardly add. We'll be waiting for you in your room. There'll be a very carefully prepared duplicate—surgical disguise, plastic fingerprinting tips, fully educated in your habits, tastes, and mannerisms. He'll stay behind and carry out your vacation while we smuggle you away. A similar exchange will be affected when you return, you'll be told exactly how your double spent the summer, and you'll resume your ordinary life."

"Ummm—well—" It was too sudden. Lancaster had to hedge. "But look—I'll be supposedly coming back from an outdoor vacation, with a suntan and well rested. Somebody's going to get suspicious."

"There'll be sun lamps where you're going, my friend. And I think the chance to work independently on something that really interests you will prove every bit as restful to your nerves as a summer's travel. I know the scientific mentality." Berg chuckled. "Yes, indeed."

The exchange went off so smoothly that it was robbed of all melodrama, though Lancaster had an unexpectedly eerie moment when he confronted his double. It was his own face that looked at him, there in the impersonal hotel room, himself framed against blowing curtains and darkness of night. Then Berg gestured him to follow and they went down a cord ladder hanging from the window sill. A car waited in the alley below and slid into easy motion the instant they had gotten inside.

There was a driver and another man in the front seat, both shadows against the moving blur of street lamps and night. Berg and Lancaster sat in the rear, and

the secret agent chatted all the way. But he said nothing of informational content.

When the highway had taken them well into the loneliness of the desert, the car turned off it, bumped along a miserable dirt track until it had crossed a ridge, and slowed before a giant transcontinental dieselectric truck. A man emerged from its cab, waving an unhurried arm, and the car swung around to the rear of the van. There was a tailgate lowered, forming a ramp; above it, the huge double doors opened on a cavern of blackness. The car slid up the ramp, and the man outside pushed it in after them and closed the doors. Presently the truck got into motion.

"This is *really* secret!" whistled Lancaster. He felt awed and helpless.

"Quite so. Security doesn't like the government's right hand to know what its left is doing." Berg smiled, a dim flash of teeth in his shadowy face. Then he was serious. "It's necessary, Lancaster. You don't know how strong and well-organized the subversives are."

"They—" The physicist closed his mouth. It was true—he hadn't the faintest notion, really. He followed the news, but in a cursory fashion, without troubling to analyze the meaning of it. Damn it all, he had enough else to think about. Just as well that elections had been suspended and bade fair to continue indefinitely in abeyance. If he, a member of the intelligentsia, wasn't sufficiently acquainted with the political and military facts of life to make rational decisions, it certainly behooved the ill-educated masses to obey.

"We might as well stretch ourselves," said the driver. "Long way to go yet." He climbed out and switched on an overhead light.

The interior of the van was roomy, even allowing for the car. There were bunks, a table and chairs, a small refrigerator and cookstove. The driver, a lean saturnine man who seemed to be forever chewing gum, began to prepare coffee. The other sat down, whistling tunelessly. He was young and powerfully built, but his right arm ended in a prosthetic claw. All of them were dressed in inconspicuous civilian garb.

"Take us about ten hours, maybe," said Berg. "The spaceship's 'way over in Colorado."

He caught Lancaster's blank stare, and grinned. "Yes, my friend, your lab is out in space. Surprised?"

"Mmm—yeah. I've never been off Earth."

"Sokay. We run at acceleration, you won't be spacesick." Berg drew up a chair, sat down, and tilted it back against a wall. The steady rumble of engines pulsed under his words:

"It's interesting, really, to consider the relationship between government and military technology. The powerful, authoritarian governments have always arisen in such times as the evolution of warfare made a successful fighting ma-

chine something elaborate, expensive, and maintainable by professionals only. Like in the Roman Empire. It took years to train a legionnaire and a lot of money to equip an army and keep it in the field. So Rome became autarchic. However, it was not so expensive a proposition that a rebellious general couldn't put some troops up for a while—or he could pay them with plunder. So you did get civil wars. Later, when the Empire had broken up and warfare relied largely on the individual barbarian who brought his own weapons with him, government loosened. It had to—any ruler who got to throwing his weight around too much would have insurrection on his hands. Then as war again became an art—well, you see how it goes. There are other factors, of course, like religion—ideology in general. But by and large, it's worked out the way I explained it. Because there are always people willing to fight when government encroaches on what they consider their liberties, and governments are always going to try to encroach. So the balance struck depends on comparative strength. The American colonists back in 1776 relied on citizen levies and weapons were so cheap and simple that almost anyone could obtain them. Therefore government stayed loose for a long time. But nowadays, who except a government can make atomic bombs and space rockets? So we get absolute states."

Lancaster looked around, feeling the loneliness close in on him. The driver was still clattering the coffee pot. The one-armed man was utterly blank and expressionless. And Berg sat there, smiling, pouring out those damnable cynicisms. Was it some kind of test? Were they probing his loyalty? What kind of reply was expected?

"We're a democratic nation and you know it," he said. It came out more feebly than he had thought.

"Oh, well, sure. This is just a state of emergency which has lasted unusually long, seventy-two years to be exact. If we hadn't lost World War III, and needed a powerful remilitarization to overthrow the Soviet world—but we did." Berg took out a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke? I was just trying to explain to you why the subversives are so dangerous. They have to be, or they wouldn't stand any kind of chance. When you set out to upset something as big as the United States government, it's an all or nothing proposition. They've had a long time now to organize, and there's a huge percentage of malcontents to help them out."

"Malcontents? Well, look, Berg—I mean, you're the expert and of course you know your business, but a natural human grumble at conditions doesn't mean revolutionary sentiments. These aren't such bad times. People have work, and their needs are supplied. They aren't hankering to have the Hemispheric Wars back again."

"The standard revolutionary argument," said Berg patiently, "is that the rebels aren't trying to overthrow the nation at all, but simply to restore constitu-

tional and libertarian government. It's common knowledge that they have help and some subsidies from outside, but it's contended that these are merely countries tired of a world dominated by an American dictatorship and, being small Latin-American and European states, couldn't possibly think of conquering us. Surely you've seen subversive literature."

"Well, yes. Can't help finding their pamphlets. All over the place. And—" Lancaster closed his mouth. No, damned if he was going to admit that he knew three co-workers who listened to rebel propaganda broadcasts. Those were silly, harmless kids—why get them in trouble, maybe get them sent to camp?

"You probably don't appreciate the hold that kind of argument has on all too many intellectuals—and a lot of the common herd, too," said Berg. "Naturally you wouldn't—if your attitude has always been unsympathetic, these people aren't going to confide their thoughts to you. And then there are bought men, and spies smuggled in, and—oh, I needn't elaborate. It's enough to say that we've been thoroughly infiltrated, and that most of their agents have absolutely impeccable dossiers. We can't give neoscop to everybody, you know—Security has to rely on spot checks and the testing of key personnel. Only when organizations get as big as they are today, there's apt to be no real key man, and a few spies strategically placed in the lower echelons can pick-up a hell of a lot of information. Then there are the colonists out on the planets—our hold on them has always necessarily been loose, because of transportation and communication difficulties if nothing else. And, as I say, foreign powers. A little country like Switzerland or Denmark or Venezuela can't do much by itself, but an undercover international pooling of resources.... Anyway, we have reason to believe in the existence of a large, well financed, well organized underground, with trained fighting men, big secret weapons dumps, and saboteurs ready for the word 'go'—to say nothing of a restless population and any number of covert sympathizers who'd follow if the initial uprising had good results."

"Or bad, depending on whose viewpoint you take," grinned the one-armed man.

Lancaster put his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead on shaking hands. "What has all this got to do with me?" he protested. "I'm not the hero of some cloak-and-dagger spy story. I'm no good at undercover stuff—what do you want of me?"

"It's very simple," Berg replied quietly. "The balance of power is still with the government, because it does have more of the really heavy weapons than any other group can possibly muster. Alphabet bombs, artillery, rockets, armor, spaceships and space missiles. You see? Only research has lately suggested that a new era in warfare is developing—a new weapon as decisive as the Macedonian phalanx, gunpowder, and aircraft were in their day." As Lancaster raised his eyes, he

met an almost febrile glitter in Berg's gaze. "And *this* weapon may reverse the trend. It may be the cheap and simple arm that anyone can make and use—the equalizer! So we've got to develop it before the rebels do. They have laboratories of their own, and their skill at stealing our secrets makes it impossible for us to trust the research to a Project in the usual manner. The fewer who knew of this weapon, the better—because in the wrong hands it could mean—Armageddon!"

The run from Earth was short, for the space laboratory wasn't far away at the moment as interplanetary distances go. Lancaster wasn't told anything about its orbit, but guessed that it had a path a million miles or so sunward from Earth and highly tilted with respect to the ecliptic. That made for almost perfect concealment, for what spaceship would normally go much north or south of the region containing the planets?

He was too preoccupied during the journey to estimate orbital figures, anyway. He had seen enough pictures of open space, and some of them had been excellent. But the reality towered unbelievably over all representations. There simply is no way of describing that naked grandeur, and when you have once experienced it you don't want to try. His companions—Berg and the one-armed Jessup, who piloted the spaceboat—respected his need for silence.

The station had been painted non-reflecting black, which complicated temperature control but made accidental observation of its existence almost impossible. It loomed against the cold glory of stars like a pit of ultimate darkness, and Jessup had to guide the boat in with radar. When the last lock had clanged shut behind him and he stood in a narrow metal corridor, shut away from the sky, Lancaster felt a sense of unendurable loss.

It faded, and he grew aware of others watching him. There were half a dozen people, a motley group dressed in any shabby garment they happened to fancy, with no sign of the semi-military discipline of a Project crew. A Martian hovered in the background, and Lancaster didn't notice him at first. Berg introduced the humans casually. There was a stocky gray-haired man named Friedrichs, a lanky space-tanned young chap called Isaacson, a middle-aged woman and her husband by the name of Dufrere, a quiet Oriental who answered to Hwang, and a red-haired woman presented as Karen Marek. These, Berg explained, were the technicians who would be helping Lancaster. This end of the space station was devoted to the labs and factories; for security reasons, Lancaster couldn't be permitted to go elsewhere, but it was hoped he would be comfortable here.

"Ummm—pardon me, aren't you a rather mixed group?" asked the physicist.

"Yes, very," said Berg cheerfully. "The Dufreres are French, Hwang is Chinese, and Karen here is Norwegian though her husband was Czech. Not to mention.... There you are, I didn't see you before! Dr. Lancaster, I'd like you to meet

Rakkan of Thyle, Mars, a very accomplished labman."

Lancaster gulped, shifting his feet and looking awkwardly at the small gray-feathered body and the beaked owl-face. Rakkan bowed politely, sparing Lancaster the decision of whether or not to shake the clawlike hand. He assumed Rakkan was somebody's slave—but since when did slaves act as social equals?

"But you said this project was top secret!" he blurted.

"Oh, it is," smiled Karen Marek. She had a husky, pleasant voice, and while she was a little too thin to be really good-looking, she was cast in a fine mold and her eyes were large and gray and lovely. "I assure you, non-Americans are perfectly capable of preserving a secret. More so than most Americans, really—we don't have ties on Earth. No one to blab to."

"It's not well known today, but the original Manhattan Project that constructed the first atomic bombs had quite an international character," said Berg. "It even included German, Italian, and Hungarian elements though the United States was at war with those countries."

"Come along and we'll get you settled in your quarters," invited Isaacson.

Lancaster followed him down the long hallways, rather dazed with the whole business. He noticed that the space station had a crude, unfinished look, as if it had been hastily thrown together from whatever materials were available. That didn't ring true for a government enterprise, no matter how secret.

Berg seemed to read his thought again. "We've worked under severe handicaps," he said. "Look, just suppose a lot of valuable material and equipment were ferried into space. If it's an ordinary government deal, you know how many light-years of red tape are involved. Requisitions have to be filled out in triplicate, every last rivet has to be accounted for—there'd simply have been too much chance of a rebel spy getting a lead on us. It was safer all around to use whatever chance materials could be obtained from salvage or through individual purchases on other planets. Ever hear of the *Waikiki*?"

"Ummm—seems so—wasn't she the big freighter that disappeared many years ago?"

"That's the one. A meteor swarm struck her on the way to Venus. Furthermore, one of them shorted out her engine controls, so that she swooped out of the ecliptic plane and fell into an eccentric skew orbit. When this project was first started, one of our astronomers thought he'd identified the swarm—it has a regular path of its own about the sun, though the orbit is so cockeyed that spaceships hardly ever even see the things. Anyway, knowing the orbit of the meteors and that of the *Waikiki* at the time, he could calculate where the disaster must have taken place—which gave us a lead in searching for the hulk. We found it after a lot of investigation, moved it here, and built the station up around it. Very handy. And completely secret."

Lancaster had always suspected that Security was a little mad. Now he knew it. Oh, well—

His room was small and austere, but privacy was nice. The lab crew ate in a common refectory. Beyond the edge of their territory, great bulkheads blocked off three-fourths of the space station. Lancaster was sure that many people and several Martians lived there, for in the days that followed he saw any number of strangers appearing and disappearing in the region allowed him. Most of these were workmen of some kind or other, called in to help the lab crew as needed, but all of them were tight-lipped. They must have been cautioned not to speak to the guest more than was strictly necessary.

Living was Spartan in the station. It rotated fast enough to give weight, but even on the outer skin that was only one-half Earth gravity. A couple of silent Martians prepared undistinguished meals and did housework in the quarters. There were no films or other organized recreation, though Lancaster was told that the forbidden sector included a good-sized room for athletics.

But the crew he worked with didn't seem to mind. They had their own large collections of books and music wires, which they borrowed from each other. They played chess and poker with savage skill. Conversation was, at first, somewhat restrained in Lancaster's presence, and most of the humor had so little reference to things he knew that he couldn't follow it, but he became aware that they talked with more animation and intelligence than his friends on Earth. Manners were utterly informal, and it wasn't long before even Lancaster was being addressed by his first name; but cooperation was smooth and there seemed to be none of the intrigue and backbiting of a typical Project crew.

And the work filled their lives. Lancaster was caught up in it the "day" after his arrival, realized at once what it meant, and was plunged into the fascination of it. Berg hadn't lied; this was big!

The perfect dielectric.

Such, at least, was the aim of the project. It was explained to Lancaster that one Dr. Sophoulis had first seen the possibilities and organized the research. It had gone ahead slowly, hampered by a lack of needed materials and expert personnel. When Sophoulis died, none of his assistants felt capable of carrying on the work at any decent rate of speed. They were all competent in their various specialties, but it takes more than training to do basic research—a certain inborn, intuitive flair is needed. So they had sent to Earth for a new boss—Lancaster.

The physicist scratched his head in puzzlement. It didn't seem right that something so important should have to take the leavings of technical personnel. Secrecy or not, the most competent men on Earth should have been tapped for this job, and they should have been given everything they needed to carry it through. Then he forgot his bewilderment in the clean chill ecstasy of the work.

Man had been hunting superior dielectrics for a long time now. It was more than a question of finding the perfect electrical insulator, though that would be handy too. What was really important was the sort of condensers made possible by a genuinely good dielectric material. Given that, you could do fantastic things in electronics. Most significant of all was the matter of energy storage. If you could store large amounts of electricity in an accumulator of small volume, without appreciable leakage loss, you could build generators designed to handle average rather than peak load—with resultant savings in cost; you could build electric motors, containing their own energy supply and hence portable—which meant electric automobiles and possibly aircraft; you could use inconveniently located power sources, such as remote waterfalls, or dilute sources like sunlight, to augment—maybe eventually replace—the waning reserves of fuel and fissionable minerals; you could.... Lancaster's mind gave up on all the possibilities opening before him and settled down to the immediate task at hand.

"The original mineral was found on Venus, in the Gorbu-vashtar country," explained Karen Marek. "Here's a sample." She gave him a lump of rough, dense material which glittered in hard rainbow points of light. "It was just a curiosity at first, till somebody thought to test its electrical properties. Those were slightly fantastic. We have all chemical and physical data on this stuff already, of course, as well as an excellent idea of its crystal structure. It's a funny mixture of barium and titanium compounds with some rare earths and—well, read the report for yourself."

Lancaster's eyes skimmed down the sheaf of papers she handed him. "Can't make very good condensers out of this," he objected. "Too brittle—and look how the properties vary with temperature. A practical dielectric has to be stable in every way, at least over the range of conditions you intend to use it in."

She nodded.

"Of course. Anyway, the mineral is very rare on Venus, and you know how tough it is to search for anything in Gorbu-vashtar. What's important is the lead it gave Sophoulis. You see, the dielectric constant of this material isn't constant at all. It *increases* with applied voltage. Look at this curve here."

Lancaster whistled. "What the devil—but that's impossible! That much variability means a crystal structure which is—uh—flexible, damn it! But you've got a brittle substance here—"

According to the accepted theory of dielectricity, this couldn't be. Lancaster realized with a thumping behind his veins that the theory would have to be modified. Rather, this was an altogether different phenomenon from normal insulation.

He supposed some geological freak had formed the mineral. Venus was a strange planet anyway. But that didn't matter. The important thing now was to get to know this process. He went off into a happy mist of quantum mechanics, oscilla-

tion theory, and periodic functions of a complex variable.

Karen and Isaacson exchanged a slow smile.

Sophoulis and his people had done heroic work under adverse conditions. A tentative theory of the mechanism involved had already been formulated, and the search had started for a means to duplicate the super-dielectricity in materials otherwise more suitable to man's needs. But as he grew familiar with the place and the job, Lancaster wondered just how adverse the conditions really were.

True, the equipment was old and cranky, much of it haywired together, much of it invented from scratch. But Rakkan the Martian, for all his lack of formal education, was unbelievably clever where it came to making apparatus and making it behave, and Friedrichs was a top-flight designer. The lab had what it needed—wasn't that enough?

The rest of Lancaster's crew were equally good. The Dufreres were physical chemists *par excellence*, Isaacson a brilliant crystallographer with an unusual brain for mathematics, Hwang an expert on quantum theory and inter-atomic forces, Karen an imaginative experimenter. None of them quite had the synthesizing mentality needed for an overall picture and a fore-vision of the general direction of work—that had been Sophoulis' share, and was now Lancaster's—but they were all cheerful and skilled where it came to detail work and could often make suggestions in a theoretical line.

Then, too, there was no Security snooping about, no petty scramble for recognition and promotion, no red tape. What was more important, Lancaster began to realize, was the personal nature of the whole affair. In a Project, the overall chief set the pattern, and it was followed by his subordinates with increasingly less latitude as you worked down through the lower ranks. You did what you were told, produced results or else, and kept your mouth shut outside your own sector of the Project. You had only the vaguest idea of what actually was being created, and why, and how it fitted into the broad scheme of society.

Hwang and Rakkan commented on that, one "evening" at dinner when they had grown more relaxed in Lancaster's presence. "It was inevitable, I suppose, that scientific research should become corporate," said the Chinese. "So much equipment was needed, and so many specialties had to be coordinated, that the solitary genius with only a few assistants hadn't a chance. Nevertheless, it's a pity. It's destroyed initiative in many promising young men. The top man is no longer a scientist at all—he's an administrator with some technical background. The lower ranks do have to exercise ingenuity, yes, but only along the lines they are ordered to follow. If some interesting sideline crops up, they can't investigate it. All they can do is submit a memorandum to the chief, and most likely if anything is done it will be carried out by someone else."

"What would you do about it?" shrugged Lancaster. "You just admitted that

the old-time genius in a garret can't compete."

"No—but the small team of creative specialists, each with an excellent understanding of the others' fields, and each working in a loose, free-willed cooperation with the rest, can. Indeed, the results will be much better. It was tried once, you may know. The early cybernetics men, back in the last century, worked that way."

"I wish we could co-opt some biologists and psychologists into this," murmured Rakkan. His English was good, though indescribably accented by his vocal apparatus. "The cellular and neural implications of dielectricity look—promising. Maybe later."

"Well," said Lancaster defensively, "a large Project can be made more secure—less chance of leakage."

Hwang said nothing, but he cocked an eyebrow at an almost treasonable angle.

In going through Sophoulis' equations, Lancaster found what he believed was the flaw that was blocking progress. The man had used a simplified quantum mechanics without correction for relativistic effects. That made for neater mathematics but overlooked certain space-time aspects of the psi function. The error was excusable, for Sophoulis had not been familiar with the Belloni matrix, a mathematical tool that brought order into what was otherwise incomprehensible chaos. Belloni's work was still classified information, being too useful, in the design of new alloys, for general consumption. Lancaster went happily to work correcting the equations. But when he was finished, he realized that he had no business showing his results without proper clearance.

He wandered glumly into the lab. Karen was there alone, setting up an apparatus for the next attempt at heat treatment. A smock covered her into shapelessness, and her spectacular hair was bound up in a kerchief, but she still looked good. Lancaster, a shy man, was more susceptible to her than he wanted to be.

"Where's Berg?" he asked.

"Back on Earth with Jessup," she told him. "Why?"

"Damn! It holds up the whole business till he returns." Lancaster explained his difficulty.

Karen laughed. "Oh, that's all right," she said in the low voice he liked to hear. "We've all been cleared."

"Not officially. I've got to see the papers."

She glared at him then and stamped her foot. "How stupid can you get without having to be spoon fed?" she snapped. "You've seen how much we think of regulations here. Let's have those equations, Mac."

"But—blast it, Karen, you don't appreciate the need for security. Berg ex-

plained it to me once—how dangerous the rebels are, and how easily they can steal our secrets. And they'll stop at nothing. Do you want another Hemispheric War?''

She looked oddly at him, and when she spoke it was softly. ''Allen, do you really believe that?''

''Certainly! It's obvious, isn't it? Our country is maintaining the peace of the Solar System—once we drop the reins, all hell will run away from us.''

''What's wrong with setting up a world-wide federation of countries? Most other nations are willing.''

''But that—it's not *practical*!''

''How do you know? It's never been tried.''

''Anyway, we can't decide policy. That's just not for us.''

''The United States is a democratic country—remember?''

''But—'' Lancaster looked away. For a moment he stood unspeaking, and she watched him with grave eyes and said nothing. Then, not really knowing why he did it, he lifted a defiant head. ''All right! We'll go ahead—and if Berg sends us all to camp, don't blame me.''

''He won't.'' She laughed and clapped his shoulder. ''You know, Allen, there are times when I think you're human after all.''

''Thanks,'' he grinned wryly. ''How about—uh—how about having a—a b-beer with me now? To celebrate.''

''Why, sure.''

They went down to the shop. A cooler of beer was there, its contents being reckoned as among the essential supplies brought from Earth by Jessup. Lancaster uncapped two bottles, and he and Karen sat down on a bench, swinging their legs and looking over the silent, waiting machines. Most of the station personnel were off duty now, in the arbitrary ''night.''

He sighed at last. ''I like it here.''

''I'm glad you do, Allen.''

''It's a funny place, but I like it. The station and all its wacky inhabitants. They're heterodox as the very devil and would have trouble getting a dog catcher's job back home, but they're all refreshing.'' Lancaster snapped his fingers. ''Say, that's it! That's why you're all out here. The government needs your talents, and you aren't quite trusted, so you're put here out of range of spies. Right?''

''Do you have to see a rebel with notebook in hand under every bed?'' she asked with a hint of weariness. ''The First Amendment hasn't been repealed yet, they say. Theoretically we're all entitled to our own opinions.''

''Okay, okay, I won't argue politics. Tell me about some of the people here, will you? They're an odd bunch.''

"I can't tell you much, Allen. That's where Security does apply. Isaacson is a Martian colonist, you've probably guessed that already. Jessup lost his hand in a—a fight with some enemies once. The Dufreres had a son who was killed in the Moroccan incident." Lancaster remembered that that affair had involved American power used to crush a French spy ring centered in North Africa. Sovereignty had been brushed aside. But damn it, you had to preserve the status quo, for your own survival if nothing else. "Hwang had to go into exile when the Chinese government changed hands a few years back. I—"

"Yes?" he asked when her voice faded out.

"Oh, I might as well tell you. My husband and I lived in America after our marriage. He was a good biotechnician and had a job with one of the big pharmaceutical companies. Only he—went to camp. Later he died or was shot, I don't know which." Her words were flat.

"That's a shame," he said inadequately.

"The funny part of it is, he wasn't engaged in treason at all. He was quite satisfied with things as they were—oh, he talked a little, but so does everybody. I imagine some rival or enemy put the finger on him."

"Those things happen," said Lancaster. "It's too bad, but they happen."

"They're bound to occur in a police state," she said. "Sorry. We weren't going to argue politics, were we?"

"I never said the world was perfect, Karen. Far from it. Only what alternative have we got? Any change is likely to be so dangerous that—well, man can't afford mistakes."

"No, he can't. But I wonder if he isn't making one right now. Oh, well. Give me another beer."

They talked on indifferent subjects till Karen said it was her bedtime. Lancaster escorted her to her apartment. She looked at him curiously as he said good night, and then went inside and closed the door. Lancaster had trouble getting to sleep.

The corrected equations provided an adequate theory of superdielectricity—a theory with tantalizing hints about still other phenomena—and gave the research team a precise idea of what they wanted in the way of crystal structure. Actually, the substance to be formed was only semi-crystalline, with plastic features as well, all interwoven with a grid of carbon-linked atoms. Now the trick was to produce that stuff. Calculation revealed what elements would be needed, and what spatial arrangement—only how did you get the atoms to assume the required configuration and hook up in the right way?

Theory would get you only so far, thereafter it was cut and try. Lancaster rolled up his sleeves with the rest and let Karen take over the leadership—she was the best experimenter. He spent some glorious and all but sleepless weeks,

greasy, dirty, living in a jungle of haywired apparatus with a restless slide rule. There were plenty of failures, a lot of heartbreak and profanity, an occasional injury—but they kept going, and they got there.

The day came—or was it the night?—when Karen took a slab of darkly shining substance out of the furnace where it had been heat-aging. Rakkan sawed it into several chunks for testing. It was Lancaster who worked on the electric properties.

He applied voltage till his generator groaned, and watched in awe as meters climbed and climbed without any sign of stopping. He discharged the accumulated energy in a single blue flare that filled the lab with thunder and ozone. He tested for time lag of an electric signal and wondered wildly if it didn't feel like sleeping on its weary path.

The reports came in, excited yells from one end of the long, cluttered room to the other, exultant whoops and men pounding each other on the back. This was it! This was the treasure at the rainbow's end.

The substance and its properties were physically and chemically stable over a temperature range of hundreds of degrees. The breakdown voltage was up in the millions. The insulation resistance was better than the best known to Earth's science.

The dielectric constant could be varied at will by a simple electric field normal to the applied voltage gradient—a field which could be generated by a couple of dry cells if need be—and ranged from a hundred thousand to about three billion. For all practical purposes, here was the ultimate dielectric.

"We did it!" Friedrichs slapped Lancaster's back till it felt that the ribs must crack. "We have it!"

"Whooppee!" yelled Karen.

Suddenly they had joined hands and were dancing idiotically around the induction furnace. Lancaster clasped Rakkan's talons without caring that it was a Martian. They sang then, sang till heads appeared at the door and the glassware shivered.

Here we go 'round the mulberry bush, The mulberry bush, the mulberry bush—

It called for a celebration. The end of a Project meant no more than filing a last report and waiting for the next assignment, but they ran things differently out here. Somebody broke out a case of Venusian aguacaliente. Somebody else led the way to a storeroom, tossed its contents into the hall, and festooned it with used computer tape. Rakkan forgot his Martian dignity and fiddled for a square dance, with Isaacson doing the calling. The folk from the other end of the station swarmed in till the place overflowed. It was quite a party.

Hours later, Lancaster was hazily aware of lying stretched on the floor. His head was in Karen's lap and she was stroking his hair. The hardy survivors were

following the Dufreres in French drinking songs, which are the best in the known universe. Rakkan's fiddle wove in and out, a lovely accompaniment to voices that were untrained but made rich and alive by triumph.

"Sur ma tomb' je veux qu'on inscrive: 'Ici-git le roi des buveurs.' Sur ma tomb' je veux qu'on inscrive: 'Ici-git le roi des buveurs. Ici-git, oui, oui, oui, Ici-git, non, non, non—'"

Lancaster knew that he had never been really happy before.

Berg showed up a couple of days later, looking worried. Lancaster's vacation time was almost up. When he heard the news, his eyes snapped gleefully and he pumped the physicist's hand. "Good work, boy!"

"There are things to clean up yet," said Lancaster, "but it's all detail. Anybody can do it."

"And the material—what do you call it, anyway?"

Karen grinned. "So far, we've only named it *ffuts*," she said. "That's 'stuff' spelled backward."

"Okay, okay. It's easy to manufacture?"

"Sure. Now that we know how, anybody can make it in his own home—if he's handy at tinkering apparatus together."

"Fine, fine! Just what was needed. This is the ticket." Berg turned back to Lancaster. "Okay, boy, you can pack now. We blast again in a few hours."

The physicist shuffled his feet. "What are my chances of getting re-assigned back here?" he asked. "I've liked it immensely. And now that I know about it anyway—"

"I'll see. I'll see. But remember, this is top secret. You go back to your regular job and don't say a word on this to anyone less than the President—no matter what happens, understand?"

"Of course," snapped Lancaster, irritated. "I know my duty."

"Yeah, so you do." Berg sighed. "So you do."

Leavetaking was tough for all concerned. They had grown fond of the quiet, bashful man—and as for him, he wondered how he'd get along among normal people. These were his sort. Karen wept openly and kissed him good-bye with a fervor that haunted his dreams afterward. Then she stumbled desolately back to her quarters. Even Berg looked glum.

He regained his cockiness on the trip home, though, and insisted on talking all the way. Lancaster, who wanted to be alone with his thoughts, was annoyed, but you don't insult a Security man.

"You understand the importance of this whole business, and why it has to be secret?" nagged Berg. "I'm not thinking of the scientific and industrial applications, but the military ones."

"Oh, sure. You can make lightning throwers if you want to. And you've overcome the fuel problem. With a few *ffuts* accumulators, charged from any handy power source, you can build fuelless military vehicles, which would simplify your logistics immensely. And some really deadly hand guns could be built—pistols the equivalent of a cannon, almost." Lancaster's voice was dead. "So what?"

"So plenty! Those are only a few of the applications. If you use your imagination, you can think of dozens more. And the key point is—the *ffuts* and the essential gadgetry using it are cheap to make in quantity, easy to handle—the perfect weapon for the citizen soldier. Or for the rebel! It isn't enough to decide the outcome of a war all by itself, but it may very well be precisely the extra element which will tip the military balance against the government. And I've already discussed what that means."

"Yes, I remember. That's your department, not mine. Just let me forget about it."

"You'd better," said Berg.

In the month after his return, Lancaster lived much as usual. He was scolded a few times for an increasing absent-mindedness and a lack of enthusiasm on the Project, but that wasn't too serious. He became more of an introvert than ever. Having some difficulty with getting to sleep, he resorted to soporifics and then, in a savage reaction, to stimulants. But outwardly there was little to show the turmoil within him.

He didn't know what to think. He had always been a loyal citizen—not a fanatic, but loyal—and it wasn't easy for him to question his own basic assumptions. But he had experienced something utterly alien to what he considered normal, and he had found the strangeness more congenial—more human in every way—than the norm. He had breathed a different atmosphere, and it couldn't but seem to him that the air of Earth was tainted. He re-read Kipling's *Chant-Pagan* with a new understanding, and began to search into neglected philosophies. He studied the news in detail, and his critical eye soon grew jaundiced—did this editorial or that feature story have any semantic content at all, or was it only a tom-tom beat of loaded connotations? The very statements of fact were subject to doubt—they should be checked against other accounts, or better yet against direct observation; but other accounts were forbidden and there was no chance to see for himself.

He took to reading seditious pamphlets with some care, and listened to a number of underground broadcasts, and tried clumsily to sound out those of his acquaintances whom he suspected of rebellious thoughts. It all had to be done very cautiously, with occasional nightmare moments when he thought he was being spied on; and was it right that a man should be afraid to hear a dissenting opinion?

He wondered what his son was doing. It occurred to him that modern education existed largely to stultify independent thought.

At the same time, he was unable to discard the beliefs of his whole life. Sedition was sedition and treason was treason—you couldn't evade that fact. There were no more wars—plenty of minor clashes, but no real wars. There was a stable economy, and nobody lacked for the essentials. The universal state might be a poor solution to the problems of a time of troubles, but it was nevertheless a solution. Change would be unthinkably dangerous.

Dangerous to whom? To the entrenched powers and their jackals. But the oppressed peoples of Earth had nothing to lose, really, except their lives, and many of them seemed quite willing to sacrifice those. Did the rights of man stop at a full belly, or was there more?

He tried to take refuge in cynicism. After all, he was well off. He was a successful jackal. But that wouldn't work either. He required a more basic philosophy.

One thing that held him back was the thought that if he became a rebel, he would be pitted against his friends—not only those of Earth, but that strange joyous crew out in space. He couldn't see fighting against them.

Then there was the very practical consideration that he hadn't the faintest idea of how to contact the underground even if he wanted to. And he'd make a hell of a poor conspirator.

He was still in an unhappy and undecided whirlpool when the monitors came for him.

They knocked on the door at midnight, as was their custom, and he felt such an utter panic that he could barely make it across the apartment to let them in. The four burly men wavered before his eyes, and there was a roaring and a darkness in his head. They arrested him without ceremony on suspicion of treason, which meant that habeas corpus and even the right of trial didn't apply. Two of them escorted him to a car, the other two stayed to search his dwelling.

At headquarters, he was put in a cell and left to stew for some hours. Then a pair of men in the uniform of the federal police led him to a questioning chamber. He was given a chair and a smiling, soft-voiced man—almost fatherly, with his plump cheeks and white hair—offered him a cigarette and began talking to him.

"Just relax, Dr. Lancaster. This is pretty routine. If you've nothing to hide then you've nothing to fear. Just tell the truth."

"Of course." It was a dry whisper.

"Oh, you're thirsty. So sorry. Alec, get Dr. Lancaster a glass of water, will you, please? And by the way, my name is Harris. Let's call this a friendly conference, eh?"

Lancaster drank avidly. Harris' manner was disarming, and the physicist felt more at ease. This was—well, it was just a mistake. Or maybe a simple spot check. Nothing to fear. He wouldn't be sent to camp—not he. Such things happened to other people, not to Allen Lancaster.

"You've been immunized against neoscop?" asked Harris.

"Yes. It's routine for my rank and over, you know. In case we should ever be kidnapped—but why am I telling *you* this?" Lancaster tried to smile. His face felt stiff.

"Hm. Yes. Too bad."

"Of course, I've no objection at all to your using a lie detector on me."

"Fine, fine." Harris beamed and gestured to one of the expressionless policemen. A table was wheeled forth, bearing the instrument. "I'm glad you're so cooperative, Dr. Lancaster. You've no idea how much trouble it saves me—and you."

They ran a few harmless calibrating questions. Then Harris said, still smiling, "And now tell me, Dr. Lancaster. Where were you really this summer?"

Lancaster felt his heart leap into his throat, and knew in a sudden terror that the dials were registering his reaction. "Why—I took my vacation," he stammered. "I was in the Southwest—"

"Mmmm—the machine doesn't quite agree with you." Harris remained impishly cheerful.

"But it's *true*! You can check back and—"

"There are such things as doubles, you know. Come, come, now, let's not waste the whole night. We both have many other things to do."

"I—look." Lancaster gulped down his panic and tried to speak calmly. "Suppose I am lying. The machine should tell you that I'm not doing so out of disloyalty. There are things I can't tell anyone without clearance. Like if you asked me about my work on the Project—I can't tell you that. Why don't you check through regular Security channels? There was a man named Berg—at least he called himself that. You'll find that it's all perfectly okay with Security."

"You can tell me anything," said Harris gently.

"I can't tell you this. Not anybody short of the President." Lancaster caught himself. "Of course, that's assuming that I did really spend the summer for something other than my vacation. But—"

Harris sighed. "I was afraid of this. I'm sorry, Lancaster." He nodded to his policemen. "Go ahead, boys."

Lancaster kept sliding into unconsciousness. They jolted him back to life with stimulant injections and vigorous slaps and resumed working on him. Now and then they would let up and Harris' face would swim out of a haze of pain,

smiling, friendly, sympathetic, offering him a smoke or a shot of whiskey. Lancaster sobbed and wanted more than anything else in the world to do as that kindly man asked. But he didn't dare. He knew what happened to those who revealed state secrets.

Finally he was thrown back into his cell and left to himself. When he recovered from his faint—that was a very slow process—he had no idea of how many hours or days had gone by. There was a water tap in the room and he drank thirstily, vomited the liquid up again, and sat with his head in his hands.

So far, he thought dully, they hadn't done too much to him. He was short several teeth, and there were some broken fingers and toes, and maybe a floating kidney. The other bruises, lacerations, and burns would heal all right if they got the chance.

Only they wouldn't.

He wondered vaguely how Security had gotten onto his track. Berg's precautions had been very thorough. So thorough, apparently, that Harris could find no trace of what had really happened that summer, and was going only on suspicion. But what had made him suspicious in the first place? An anonymous tip-off—from whom? Maybe some enemy, some rival on the Project, had chosen this way of getting rid of his sector chief.

In the end, Lancaster thought wearily, he'd tell. Why not do it now? Then—probably—he'd only be shot for betraying Berg's confidence. That would be the easy way out.

No. He'd hang on for awhile yet. There was always a faint chance.

His cell door opened and two guards came in. He was past flinching from them, but he had to be supported on his way to the questioning room.

Harris sat there, still smiling. "How do you do, Dr. Lancaster," he said politely.

"Not so well, thank you." The grin hurt his face.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But really, it's your own fault. You know that."

"I can't tell you anything," said Lancaster. "I'm under Security oath. I can't speak of this to anyone below the President."

Harris looked annoyed. "Don't you think the President has better things to do than come running to every enemy of the state that yaps after him?"

"There's been some mistake, I tell you," pleaded Lancaster.

"I'll say there has. And you're the one that's made it. Go ahead, boys." Harris picked up a magazine and started reading.

After awhile, Lancaster focused his mind on Karen Marek and kept it there. That helped him bear up. If they knew, out in the station, what was happening to him, they—well, they wouldn't forget him, try to pretend they'd never known him,

as the little fearful people of Earth did. They'd speak up, and do their damnedest to save their friend.

The blows seemed to come from very far away. They didn't do things like this out in the station. Lancaster realized the truth at that moment, but it held no surprise. The most natural thing in the world. And now, of course, he'd never talk.

Maybe.

When he woke up, there was a man before him. The face blurred, seemed to grow to monstrous size and then move out to infinite distances. The voice of Harris had a ripple in it, wavering up and down, up and down.

"All right, Lancaster, here's the President. Since you insist, here he is."

"Go ahead, American," said the man. "Tell me. It's your duty."

"No," said Lancaster.

"But I am the President. You wanted to see me."

"Most likely a double. Prove your identity."

The man who looked like the President sighed and turned away.

Lancaster woke up again lying on a cot. He must have been brought awake by a stimulant, for a white-coated figure was beside him, holding a hypodermic syringe. Harris was there too, looking exasperated.

"Can you talk?" he asked.

"I—yes." Lancaster's voice was a dull croak. He moved his head, feeling the ache of it.

"Look here, fellow," said Harris. "We've been pretty easy with you so far. Nothing has happened to you that can't be patched up. But we're getting impatient now. It's obvious that you're a traitor and hiding something."

Well, yes, thought Lancaster, he was a traitor, by one definition. Only it seemed to him that a man had a right to choose his own loyalties. Having experienced what the police state meant, he would have been untrue to himself if he had yielded to it.

"If you don't answer my questions in the next session," said Harris, "we'll have to start getting really rough."

Lancaster remained silent. It was too much effort to try to speak.

"Don't think you're being heroic," said Harris. "There's nothing pretty or even very human about a man under interrogation. You've been screaming as loud as anybody."

Lancaster looked away.

He heard the doctor's voice. "I'd advice giving him a few days' rest before starting again, sir."

"You're new here, aren't you?" asked Harris.

"Yes, sir. I was only assigned to this duty a few weeks ago."

"Well, we don't put on kid gloves for traitors."

"That's not what I mean, sir," said the doctor. "There are limits to pain beyond which further treatment simply doesn't register. Also, I'm a little suspicious about this man's heart. It has a murmur, and questioning puts a terrific strain on it. You wouldn't want him to die on your hands, would you, sir?"

"Mmmm—no. What do you advise?"

"Just a few days in the hospital, with treatment and rest. It'll also have a psychological effect as he thinks of what's waiting for him."

Harris considered for a moment. "All right. I've got enough other things to do anyway."

"Very good, sir. You won't regret this."

Lancaster heard the footsteps retreat into silence. Presently the doctor came around to stand facing him. He was a short, curly-haired man of undistinguished appearance. For a moment they locked eyes, then Lancaster closed his. He wanted to tell the doctor to go away, but it wasn't worth the trouble.

Later he was put on a stretcher and carried down endless halls to another cell. This one had a hospital look about it, somehow, and the air was sharp with the smell of antiseptics. The doctor came when he was installed in bed and took his arm and slipped a needle into it. "Sleepy time," he said.

Lancaster drifted away again.

When he woke up, he felt darkness and movement. He looked around, wondering if he had gone blind, and the breath moaned out between his bruised lips. A hand was laid on his shoulder and a voice spoke out of the black.

"It's okay, fella. Take it easy. There'll be no more questions."

It was the doctor's voice, and the doctor looked nothing at all like Charon, but still Lancaster wondered if he weren't being ferried over the river of death. There was a thrumming all about him, and he heard a low keening of wind. "Where are we going?" he mumbled.

"Away. You're in a stratorocket now. Just take it easy."

Lancaster fell asleep after awhile.

Beyond that there was a drugged, confused period where he was only dimly aware of moving and trying to talk. Shadows floated across his vision, shadows telling him something he couldn't quite grasp. He followed obediently enough. Full clarity came eventually, and he was lying in a bunk looking up at a metal ceiling. The shivering pulse of rockets trembled in his body. A spaceship?

A spaceship!

He sat up, heart thudding, and looked wildly around. "Hey!" he cried.

The remembered figure of Berg came through the door. "Hullo, Allen," he

said. "How're you feeling?"

"I—you—" Lancaster sank weakly back to his pillow. He grew aware that he was thoroughly bandaged, splinted, and braced, and that there was no more pain. Not much, anyway.

"I feel fine," he said.

"Good, good. The doc says you'll be okay." Berg sat down on the edge of the bunk. "I can't stay here long, but the hell with it. We'll be at the station soon. You deserve to know some things, such as that you've been rescued."

"Well, that's obvious," said Lancaster.

"By us. The rebels. The underground. Subversive characters."

"That's obvious too. And thanks—" The word was so ridiculously inadequate that Lancaster had to laugh.

"I suppose you've guessed most of it already," said Berg. "We needed a scientist of your caliber for our project. One thing we're desperately short of is technical personnel, since the only real education in such lines is to be had on Earth and most graduates find comfortable berths in the existing society. Like you, for instance. So we played a trick on you. We used part of our organization—yes, we have a big one, and it's pretty smart and powerful too—to convince you this was a government job of top secrecy. More damn things can be done in the name of Security—" Berg clicked his tongue. "Everybody you saw at the station was more or less play-acting, of course. The whole thing was set up to fool you. We might not have gotten away with it if we'd used some other person, more shrewd about such things, but we'd studied you and knew you for an amiable, unsuspicious guy, too wrapped up in your own work to go witch-smelling."

"I guessed that much," admitted Lancaster. "After I'd been in the cells for awhile. Your way of living and thinking was so different from anything like—"

"Yeah. I'm sorry as hell about that, Allen. We thought you could just return to ordinary life, but somehow—through one of those accidents or malices inevitable in a state where every man spies on his neighbor—you were hauled in. We knew of it at once—yes, we've even infiltrated the secret police—and decided to do something about it. Quite apart from the danger of your betraying what you knew—we could have eliminated that by quietly murdering you—there was the fact that we'd gotten you into this and did owe you something. We managed to get Dr. Pappas transferred to the inquisitory where you were being held. He drugged you, producing a remarkably corpse-like figure, and smuggled you out as simply another one who'd died under questioning. I used my Security papers to get the body for special autopsy instead of the usual immediate cremation. Then we simply drove till we reached the stratorocket we'd arranged to have ready, and you were flown to our spaceboat, and now you're on the way back to the station. You were kept under drugs most of the way to help you rest—they'd knocked you

around quite a bit in the inquisitory. So—" Berg shrugged. "Pappas can't go back to Earth now, of course, but we can always use a medic in space, and it was well worth the trouble to rescue you."

"I'm honored," said Lancaster.

"I still feel like hell about what happened to you, though."

"It's all right. I can't say I enjoyed it, but now that I've learned some hard facts—oh, well, forget the painful nature of the lesson. I'll be okay. And I'm going home!"

Jessup supported Lancaster as they entered the space station. His old crew was there waiting to greet him. They were all immensely pleased to have him back, though Karen wept bitterly on his shoulder.

"It's all right," he told her. "I'm not in such bad shape as I look. Honest, Karen, I'm all right. And now that I have gotten back, and know where I really belong—damn, but it was worth it!"

She looked at him with eyes as gray as a rainy dawn. "And you are with us?" she whispered. "You're one of us? Of your own will?"

"Of course I am. Give me a week or two to rest, and I'll be back in the lab bossing all of you like a Simon Legree. Hell, we've just begun on that super-dielectricity. And there are a lot of other things I want to try out, too."

"It means exile," she said. "No more blue skies and green valleys and ocean winds. No more going back to Earth."

"Well, there are other planets, aren't there? And we'll go back to Earth in the next decade, I bet. Back to start a new American Revolution and write the Bill of Rights in the sky for all to see." Lancaster grinned shyly. "I'm not much at making speeches, and I certainly don't like to listen to them. But I've learned the truth and I want to say it out loud. The right of man to be free is the most basic one he's got, and when he gives that up he finishes by surrendering everything else too. You people are fighting to bring back honesty and liberty and the possibility of progress. I hope nobody here is a fanatic, because fanaticism is exactly what we're fighting against. I say we, because from now on I'm one of you. That is, if you're sure you want me."

He stopped, clumsily. "Okay. Speech ended."

Karen drew a shivering breath and smiled at him. "And everything else just begun, Allen," she said. He nodded, feeling too much for words.

"Get to bed with you," ordered Pappas.

Jessup led Lancaster off, and one by one the others drifted back to their jobs. Finally only Karen and Berg stood by the airlock.

"You keep your beautiful mouth shut, my dear," said the man.

"Oh, sure." Karen sighed unhappily. "I wish I'd never learned your scheme.

When you explained it to me I wanted to shoot you.''

''You insisted on an explanation,'' said Berg defensively. ''When Allen was due to go back to Earth, you wanted us to tell him who we were and keep him. But it wouldn't have worked. I've studied his dossier, and he's not the kind of man to switch loyalties that easily. If we were to have him at all, it could only be with his full consent. And now we've got him.''

''It was still a lousy trick,'' she said.

''Of course it was. But we had no choice. We *had* to have a first-rate physicist.''

''You know,'' she said, ''you're a rat from way back.''

''That I am. And by and large, I enjoy it.'' Berg grimaced. ''Though I must admit this job leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I like Allen. It was the hardest thing I ever did, tipping off the federal police about him.''

He turned on his heel and walked away, smiling faintly.

SEE

Seeing things? Don't go to an analyst—see the Commission—if it doesn't find you first!

Well, there was this song a few years back. You know the one. Phil Harris singing about a thing that you couldn't get rid of, no matter what you did, a thing so repulsive it made you a social outcast. Never thought I'd see one, though. Dirty Pete found it.

Don't rush me. I'll tell you about it.

We're hobos, understand? Now a hobo is a different breed of cat than you think. Oh, people are getting educated to the idea that a hobo will work and move on, whereas a tramp will mooch and move on, and a bum will mooch and hang around, but you still find folks who are ignorant enough to call us bums.

We're aristocrats, yes sir. If it wasn't for us, you wouldn't enjoy half the little luxuries you do. Oh, don't believe me—talk to your experts. They know that, without the migratory worker, most of the crops wouldn't get harvested. And, if I talk highfalutin' once in a while, don't blame me. Associating with the Professor improves any man's vocabulary, in spite of themselves.

There was the four of us, see? We'd been kicking around together for longer than I care to think about. There was the Professor and Dirty Pete and Sacks and Eddie. I'm Eddie. Nicknames are funny things. Take the Professor—he was a real professor once, until he began hitting the bottle. Well, he lost his job, his home, his family, and his rep.

One morning, he wakes up on Skid Row without a nickel in his jeans and the great-granddaddy of all hangovers. He comes to a decision. Either he could make a man out of hisself, or he could die. Right then, dying looked like the easiest thing to do, but it took more guts that he had to jump off a bridge, so he went on the Road instead.

After he got over his shakes—and he sure had 'em bad—he decided that, if

he never took another drink, it'd be the best thing for him. So he didn't. He had a kind of dignity, though, and he could really talk, so he and I teamed up during the wheat harvest in South Dakota. We made all the stops and, when we hit the peaches in California we picked up Sacks and Dirty Pete.

Sacks got his monicker because he never wore shoes. He claimed that gunny-sacks, wrapped around his feet and shins, gave as much protection and more freedom, and they were more comfortable, besides costing nix. Since we mostly bought our shoes at the dumps, at four bits a pair, you might say he was stretching a point, but that's one of the laws of the Road. You don't step on the other guy's corns, and he don't step on yours.

So guess why Dirty Pete was called that. Yeah. He hadn't taken a bath since 'forty-six, when he got out of the army, and he didn't figure on ever takin' another. He was a damn' good worker, though, and nobody'd ever try anything with him around. He wasn't any bigger than a Mack truck. Besides, he was quiet.

Oh, sure. You wanna know why I'm on the Road. Well, it happens I like whiskers. Trouble is, they're not fashionable, unless you're some kind of an artist, which I'm not. You know, social disapproval. I didn't have the guts to face it, so I lit out. Nobody cares on the Road what you do, so I was okay with my belt-length beard.

A beard's an enjoyable thing, too. There's a certain kind of thrill you get from stroking it, and feeling its silkiness run through your fingers. And besides, combing it, and keeping it free of burrs, snarls and tangles, sort of keeps your spare moments so full that the devil don't find any idle time to put your hands to work in. If you ask me, I think that the razor has been the downfall of society. And I'm willing to bet I have plenty of company with the same opinion.

Show me a man who doesn't let his beard grow once in a while, even if it's only for a day or so, and you've shown me a man who thinks more of social pressure than he does of his own comfort. And show me a man who says he likes to shave, and you've shown me a man who is either a liar or is asking for punishment.

That's enough about us. Now to get on with the story. You know, if the Professor hadn't been around, there would probably have been murder done over the Thing, or at least our little group would've split up, 'cause none of us had the brains to figure it out.

Pete's an expert scrounger. His eyes are sharp, and he's always on the lookout for a salable piece of goods, even if he can only get a nickel for it. One night, we're sitting in a jungle near Sacramento, trying to figure out whether to go north for the grapes, or south for the grapes. They're all over California, you know, and they pay pretty well.

Pete, as usual, is out looking, and pretty soon he comes back into camp with this thing in his hand. He handles it like it was hot, but he's pleased he's found it,

because he hopes to merchandise it. So he walks up to me, and says, "Hey, Eddie. What'll you gimme for this, huh?"

I say, "Get that to hell away from me! I'll give you a swift kick in the pants if you don't."

He looks real surprised. He says, "Huh, I thought maybe you could use it."

I get up on my feet. I say, real low and careful, because maybe he's joking, "Look, Pete—you oughtta know by this time, I like my beard. Now will you go away?"

He mooches off, looking like I'd kicked him, and goes over to the Professor. I figure maybe the Professor could use it, so I listen. The Prof looks like he was being offered a live rattlesnake.

"No, thanks, really, Pete. I have resolved never to touch it again. I hope you don't mind."

Well, for some reason Pete don't look pleased, and he's real unhappy by this time, but he tries again.

"Hey, Sacks, what'll you gimme for—"

He don't get a chance to finish. I'm only listening with half an ear, but I'm so surprised I stand up like I been stuck with a pin. Sacks says, "Whatinell would I do with a left shoe? You know I don't use 'em."

Pete looks at the thing in his hand, and the Prof and I go over there.

The Professor looks at the thing real carefully and speaks up. "Say, Pete, look at that thing and tell me what it is."

"Why, it's a brand new bar of soap, of course. I don't use it, but one of you might want to. What's all the beef about?"

"Soap?" I say. "Why, you poor fish, something must have happened to your eyes. When you offered me that straight razor, I thought you'd gone off your nut. Now I know it."

The Professor interrupts. He looks excited. "Wait a minute, Eddie. To me that item looks exactly like a full fifth of Old Harvester, 100 proof. Used to be my favorite, before I became an abstainer. To Pete, it looks like soap. To you, it looks like a straight razor while, to Sacks, it resembles a shoe. Does that give you any ideas?"

"Means we're all having hallucinations," I grunts.

"Exactly. Pete, was there anything else in the location where you found this thing?"

"Nothing but some scrap tin."

"Show us."

So, the four of us wanders across the field and, sure enough, there was this silly-looking object lying there. It was about eighteen or twenty feet across, and

two feet thick, and I nearly made a fool of myself. I almost screamed when I saw six straight razors crawling out of a hole in its side.

The Professor whistled. "Grab them, boys. We want them."

Well, Sacks sacrifices one of his sacks, and we rounded up fifteen of the useless things. We went back to the jungle, where the Prof explained it.

"Look, fellows, suppose you were a being from another planet that wanted to take over here. Suppose, further, that you were rather small and relatively defenseless. To finish the suppositions, suppose you were a positive telepath, with not only the ability to read minds, but also the ability to create visual and tactile hallucinations. How would you protect yourself?"

A light began to dawn, but I didn't say a word about it.

The Professor continued. "If you could do all this, you'd make yourself look just as useless as possible. To Pete, you'd look like a bar of soap, because he never uses the stuff. To Sacks, you'd look like a shoe, because his dislike for shoes is evident in his mind. To Eddie, who is proud of his beard, you'd look like a razor, while to me, you'd look like a bottle of booze, because I dislike its effects intensely. In other words, you would assume an imposture that would assure you'd never be picked up, except by someone like Pete, who would see in you a salable item, even though not a usable one. It may be, Pete, that you have saved the world."

So, that's the story. We're all still on the Road, of course, but now we are the "Commission for the Investigation of Extraterrestrial Invasion." Congress named us as that, when we got the data to them.

Now, Mr. Mayor, you see our problem. Have your citizens seen anything around that they don't want? If they have, we want to look at it.

SENSE FROM THOUGHT DIVIDE

What is a "phony"? Someone who believes he can do X, when he can't, however sincerely he believes it? Or someone who can do X, believes he can't, and believes he is pretending he can?

"Remembrance and reflection, how allied;
What thin partitions sense from thought divide."

—Pope

When I opened the door to my secretary's office, I could see her looking up from her desk at the Swami's face with an expression of fascinated skepticism. The Swami's back was toward me, and on it hung flowing folds of a black cloak. His turban was white, except where it had rubbed against the back of his neck.

"A tall, dark, and handsome man will soon come into your life," he was intoning in that sepulchral voice men habitually use in their dealings with the absolute.

Sara's green eyes focused beyond him, on me, and began to twinkle.

"And there he is right now," she commented dryly. "Mr. Kennedy, Personnel Director for Computer Research."

The Swami whirled around, his heavy robe following the movement in a practiced swirl. His liquid black eyes looked me over shrewdly, and he bowed toward me as he vaguely touched his chest, lips and forehead. I expected him to murmur, "Effendi," or "Bwana Sahib," or something, but he must have felt silence was more impressive.

I acknowledged his greeting by pulling down one corner of my mouth. Then I looked at his companion.

The young lieutenant was standing very straight, very stiff, and a flush of pink was starting up from his collar and spreading around his clenched jaws to leave a semicircle of white in front of his red ears.

"Who are you?" I asked the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Murphy," he answered shortly, and managed to open his teeth a bare quarter of an inch for the words to come out. "Pentagon!" His light gray eyes pierced me to see if I were impressed.

I wasn't.

"Division of Matériel and Supply," he continued in staccato, as if he were imitating a machine gun.

I waited. It was obvious he wasn't through yet. He hesitated, and I could see his Adam's apple travel up above the knot of his tie and back down again as he swallowed. The pink flush deepened suddenly into brilliant red and spread all over his face.

"Poltergeist Section," he said defiantly.

"What?" The exclamation was out before I could catch it.

He tried to glare at me, but his eyes were pleading instead.

"General Sanfordwaithe said you'd understand." He intended to make it matter of fact in a sturdy, confident voice, but there was the undertone of a wail. It was time I lent a hand before his forces were routed and left him shattered in hopeless defeat.

"You're West Point, aren't you?" I asked kindly.

It seemed to remind him of the old shoulder-to-shoulder tradition. He straightened still more. I hadn't believed it possible.

"Yes, sir!" He wanted to keep the gratitude out of his voice, but it was there. It did not escape my attention that, for the first time, he had spoken the habitual term of respect to me.

"Well, what do you have here, Lieutenant Murphy?" I nodded toward the Swami who had been wavering between a proud, free stance and that of a drooping supplicant. The lieutenant, whose quality had been recognized, even by a civilian, was restored unto himself. He was again ready to do or die.

"According to my orders, sir," he said formally, "you have requested the Pentagon furnish you with one half dozen, six, male-type poltergeists. I am delivering the first of them to you, sir."

Sara's mouth, hanging wide open, reminded me to close my own.

So the Pentagon was calling me on my bluff. Well, maybe they did have something at that. I'd see.

"Float me over that ash tray there on the desk," I said casually to the Swami.

He looked at me as if I'd insulted him, and I could anticipate some reply to the effect that he was not applying for domestic service. But the humble supplicant rather than the proud and fierce hill man won. He started to pick up the ash tray from Sara's desk with his hand.

"No, no!" I exclaimed. "I didn't ask you to hand it to me. I want you to TK it over to me. What's the matter? Can't you even TK a simple ash tray?"

The lieutenant's eyes were getting bigger and bigger.

"Didn't your Poltergeist Section test this guy's aptitudes for telekinesis before you brought him from Washington all the way out here to Los Angeles?" I snapped at him.

The lieutenant's lips thinned to a bloodless line. Apparently I, a civilian, was criticizing the judgment of the Army.

"I am certain he must have qualified adequately," he said stiffly, and this time left off the "sir."

"Well, I don't know," I answered doubtfully. "If he hasn't even enough telekinetic ability to float me an ash tray across the room—"

The Swami recovered himself first. He put the tips of his long fingers together in the shape of a sway-backed steeple, and rolled his eyes upward.

"I am an instrument of infinite wisdom," he intoned. "Not a parlor magician."

"You mean that with all your infinite wisdom you can't do it," I accused flatly.

"The vibrations are not favorable—" he rolled the words sonorously.

"All right," I agreed. "We'll go somewhere else, where they're better!"

"The vibrations throughout all this crass, materialistic Western world—" he intoned.

"All right," I interrupted, "we'll go to India, then. Sara, call up and book tickets to Calcutta on the first possible plane!" Sara's mouth had been gradually closing, but it unhinged again.

"Perhaps not even India," the Swami murmured, hastily. "Perhaps Tibet."

"Now you know we can't get admission into Tibet while the Communists control it," I argued seriously. "But how about Nepal? That's a fair compromise. The Maharajadhiraja's friendly now. I'll settle for Nepal."

The Swami couldn't keep the triumphant glitter out of his eyes. The sudden worry that I really would take him to India to see if he could TK an ash tray subsided. He had me.

"I'm afraid it would have to be Tibet," he said positively. "Nowhere else in all this troubled world are the vibrations—"

"Oh go on back to Flatbush!" I interrupted disgustedly. "You know as well as I that you've never been outside New York before in your life. Your accent's as phony as the pear-shaped tones of a Midwestern garden club president. Can't even TK a simple ash tray!"

I turned to the amazed lieutenant.

"Will you come into my office?" I asked him.

He looked over at the Swami, in doubt.

"He can wait out here," I said. "He won't run away. There isn't any subway, and he wouldn't know what to do. Anyway, if he did get lost, your Army Intelligence could find him. Give G-2 something to work on. Right through this door, lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," he said meekly, and preceded me into my office.

I closed the door behind us and waved him over to the crying chair. He folded at the knees and hips, as if he were hinged only there, as if there were no hinges at all in the ramrod of his back. He sat up straight, on the edge of his chair, ready to spring into instant charge of battle. I went around back to my desk and sat down.

"Now, lieutenant," I said soothingly, "tell me all about it."

I could have sworn his square chin quivered at the note of sympathy in my voice. I wondered, irrelevantly, if the lads at West Point all slept with their faces confined in wooden frames to get that characteristically rectangular look.

"You knew I was from West Point," he said, and his voice held a note of awe. "And you knew, right away, that Swami was a phony from Flatbush."

"Come now," I said with a shrug. "Nothing to get mystical about. Patterns. Just patterns. Every environment leaves the stamp of its matrix on the individual shaped in it. It's a personnel man's trade to recognize the make of a person, just as you would recognize the make of a rifle."

"Yes, sir. I see, sir," he answered. But of course he didn't. And there wasn't much use to make him try. Most people cling too desperately to the ego-saving formula: Man cannot know man.

"Look, lieutenant," I said, with an idea that we'd better get down to business. "Have you been checked out on what this is all about?"

"Well, sir," he answered, as if he were answering a question in class, "I was cleared for top security, and told that a few months ago you and your Dr. Auerbach, here at Computer Research, discovered a way to create antigravity. I was told you claimed you had to have a poltergeist in the process. You told General Sanfordwaithe that you needed six of them, males. That's about all, sir. So the Poltergeist Division discovered the Swami, and I was assigned to bring him out here to you."

"Well then, Lieutenant Murphy, you go back to the Pentagon and tell General Sanfordwaithe that—" I could see by the look on his face that my message would probably not get through verbatim. "Never mind, I'll write it," I amended disgustedly. "And you can carry the message." Lesser echelons do not relish the task of repeating uncomplimentary words verbatim to a superior. Not usually.

I punched Sara's button on my intercom.

"After all the exposure out there to the Swami," I said, "if you're still with us on this crass, materialistic plane, will you bring your book?"

"My astral self has been hovering over you, guarding you, every minute," Sara answered dreamily.

"Can it take shorthand?" I asked dryly.

"Maybe I'd better come in," she replied.

When she came through the door the lieutenant gave her one appreciative glance, then returned to his aloof pedestal of indifference. Obviously his pattern was to stand in majestic splendor and allow the girls to fawn somewhere down near his shoes. These lads with a glamour boy complex almost always gravitate toward some occupation which will require them to wear a uniform. Sara catalogued him as quickly as I did, and seemed unimpressed. But you never can tell about a woman; the smartest of them will fall for the most transparent poses.

"General Sanfordwaithe, dear sir," I began as she sat down at one corner of my desk and flipped open her book. "It takes more than a towel wrapped around the head and some mutterings about infinity to get poltergeist effects. So I am returning your phony Swami to you with my compliments—"

"Beg your pardon, sir," the lieutenant interrupted, and there was a certain note of suppressed triumph in his voice. "In case you rejected our applicant for the poltergeist job you have in mind, I was to hand you this." He undid a lovingly polished button of his tunic, slipped his hand beneath the cloth and pulled forth a long, sealed envelope.

I took it from him and noted the three sealing-wax imprints on the flap. From being carried so close to his heart for so long, the envelope was slightly less crisp than when he had received it. I slipped my letter opener in under the side flap, and gently extracted the letter without, in anyway, disturbing the wax seals which were to have guaranteed its privacy. There wasn't any point in my doing it, of course, except to demonstrate to the lieutenant that I considered the whole deal as a silly piece of cloak and dagger stuff.

After the general formalities, the letter was brief: "Dear Mr. Kennedy: We already know the Swami is a phony, but our people have been convinced that in spite of this there are some unaccountable effects. We have advised your general manager, Mr. Henry Grenoble, that we are in the act of carrying out our part of the agreement, namely, to provide you with six male-type poltergeists, and to both you and him we are respectfully suggesting that you get on with the business of putting the antigravity units into immediate production."

I folded the letter and tucked it into one side of my desk pad. I looked at Sara.

"Never mind the letter to General Sanfordwaithe," I said. "He has success-

fully cut off my retreat in that direction." I looked over at the lieutenant. "All right," I said resignedly, "I'll apologize to the Swami, and make a try at using him."

I picked up the letter again and pretended to be reading it. But this was just a stall, because I had suddenly been struck by the thought that my extreme haste in scoring off the Swami and trying to get rid of him was because I didn't want to get involved again with poltergeists. Not any, of any nature.

The best way on earth to avoid having to explain psi effects and come to terms with them is simply to deny them, convince oneself that they don't exist. I sighed deeply. It looked as if I would be denied that little human privilege of closing my eyes to the obvious.

Old Stone Face, our general manager, claimed to follow the philosophy of building men, not machines. To an extent he did. His favorite phrase was, "Don't ask me how. I hired you to tell me." He hired a man to do a job, and I will say for him, he left that man alone as long as the job got done. But when a man flubbed a job, and kept on flubbing it, then Mr. Henry Grenoble stepped in and carried out his own job—general managing.

He had given me the assignment of putting antigrav units into production. He had given me access to all the money I would need for the purpose. He had given me sufficient time, months of it. And, in spite of all this coöperation, he still saw no production lines which spewed out antigrav units at some such rate as seventeen and five twelfths per second.

Apparently he got his communication from the Pentagon about the time I got mine. Apparently it contained some implication that Computer Research, under his management, was not pursuing the cause of manufacturing antigrav units with diligence and dispatch. Apparently he did not like this.

I had no more than apologized to the Swami, and received his martyred forgiveness, and arranged for a hotel suite for him and the lieutenant, when Old Stone Face sent for me. He began to manage with diligence and dispatch.

"Now you look here, Kennedy," he said forcefully, and his use of my last name, rather than my first, was a warning, "I've given you every chance. When you and Auerbach came up with that antigrav unit last fall, I didn't ask a lot of fool questions. I figured you knew what you were doing. But the whole winter has passed, and here it is spring, and you haven't done anything that I can see. I didn't say anything when you told General Sanfordwaithe that you'd have to have poltergeists to carry on the work, but I looked it up. First I thought you'd flipped your lid, then I thought you were sending us all on a wild goose chase so we'd leave you alone, then I didn't know what to think."

I nodded. He wasn't through.

"Now I think you're just pretending the whole thing doesn't exist because you don't want to fool with it."

Perhaps he had come to the right decision after all. I'd resolutely washed the whole thing out of my mind. But I wasn't going to get away with it. I could see it coming.

"For the first time, Kennedy, I'm asking you what happened?" he said firmly, but his tone was more telling than asking. So I was going to have to discuss frameworks with Old Stone Face, after all.

"Henry," I asked slowly, "have you kept up your reading in theoretical physics?"

He blinked at me. I couldn't tell whether it meant yes or no.

"When we went to school, you and I—" I hoped my putting us both in the same age group would tend to mollify him a little, "physics was all snug, secure, safe, definite. A fact was a fact, and that's all there was to it. But there's been some changes made. There's the coördinate systems of Einstein, where the relationships of facts can change from framework to framework. There's the application of multivalued logic to physics where a fact becomes not a fact any longer. The astronomers talk about the expanding universe—it's a piker compared to man's expanding concepts about that universe."

He waited for more. His face seemed to indicate that I was beating around the bush.

"That all has a bearing on what happened," I assured him. "You have to understand what was behind the facts before you can understand the facts themselves. First, we weren't trying to make an antigrav unit at all. Dr. Auerbach was playing around with a chemical approach to cybernetics. He made up some goop which he thought would store memory impulses, the way the brain stores them. He brought a plastic cylinder of it over to me, so I could discuss it with you. I laid it on my desk while I went on with my personnel management business at hand."

Old Stone Face opened a humidor and took out a cigar. He lit it slowly and deliberately and looked at me sharply as he blew out the first puff of smoke.

"The nursery over in the plant had been having trouble with a little girl, daughter of one of our production women. She'd been throwing things, setting things on fire. The teachers didn't know how she did it, she just did it. They sent her to me. I asked her about it. She threw a tantrum, and when it was all over, Auerbach's plastic cylinder of goop was trying to fall upward, through the ceiling. That's what happened," I said.

He looked at his cigar, and looked at me. He waited for me to tie the facts to the theory. I hesitated, and then tried to reassure myself. After all, we were in the business of manufacturing computers. The general manager ought to be able to understand something beyond primary arithmetic.

"Jennie Malasek was a peculiar child with a peculiar background," I went on. "Her mother was from the old country, one of the Slav races. There's the inher-

itance of a lot of peculiar notions. Maybe she had passed them on to her daughter. She kept Jennie locked up in their room. The kid never got out with other children. Children, kept alone, never seeing anybody, get peculiar notions all by themselves. Who, knows what kind of a coördinate system she built up, or how it worked? Her mother would come home at night and go about her tasks talking aloud, half to the daughter, half to herself. 'I really burned that foreman up, today,' she'd say. Or, 'Oh, boy, was he fired in a hurry!' Or, 'She got herself thrown out of the place,' things like that."

"So what does that mean, Ralph?" he asked. His switch to my first name indicated he was trying to work with me instead of pushing me.

"To a child who never knew anything else," I answered, "one who had never learned to distinguish reality from unreality—as we would define it from our agreed framework—a special coördinate system might be built up where '*Everybody was up in the air at work, today*,' might be taken literally. Under the old systems of physics that couldn't happen, of course—it says in the textbooks—but since it has been happening all through history, in thousands of instances, in the new systems of multivalued physics we recognize it. Under the old system, we already had all the major answers, we thought. Now that we've got our smug certainties knocked out of us, we're just fumbling along, trying to get some of the answers we thought we had.

"We couldn't make that cylinder activate others. We tried. We're still trying. In ordinary cybernetics you can have one machine punch a tape and it can be fed into another machine, but that means you first have to know how to code and decode a tape mechanically. We don't know how to code or decode a psi effect. We know the Auerbach cylinder will store a psi impulse, but we don't know how. So we have to keep working with psi gifted people, at least until we've established some of the basic laws governing psi."

I couldn't tell by Henry's face whether I was with him or away from him. He told me he wanted to think about it, and made a little motion with his hand that I should leave the room.

I walked through the suite of executive offices and down a sound rebuffing hallway. The throbbing clatter of manufacture of metallic parts made a welcome sound as I went through the far doorway into the factory. I saw a blueprint spread on a foreman's desk as I walked past. Good old blueprint. So many millimeters from here to there, made of such and such an alloy, a hole punched here with an allowance of five-ten-thousandths plus or minus tolerance. Snug, secure, safe. I wondered if psi could ever be blue-printed. Or suppose you put a hole here, but when you looked away and then looked back it had moved, or wasn't there at all?

Quickly, I got myself into a conversation with a supervisor about the rising rate of employee turnover in his department. That was something also snug, se-

cure, safe. All you had to do was figure out human beings.

I spent the rest of the morning on such pursuits, working with things I understood.

On his first rounds of the afternoon, the interoffice messenger brought me a memorandum from the general manager's office. I opened it with some misgivings. I was not particularly reassured.

Mr. Grenoble felt he should work with me more closely on the antigrav project. He understood, from his researches, that the most positive psi effects were experienced during a seance with a medium. Would I kindly arrange for the Swami to hold a seance that evening, after office hours, so that he might analyze the man's methods and procedures to see how they could fit smoothly into Company Operation. This was not to be construed as interference in the workings of my department but in the interests of pursuing the entire matter with diligence and dispatch—

The seance was to be held in my office.

I had had many peculiar conferences in this room—from union leaders stripping off their coats, throwing them on the floor and stomping on them; to uplifters who wanted to ban cosmetics on our women employees so the male employees would not be tempted to think Questionable Thoughts. I could not recall ever having held a seance before.

My desk had been moved out of the way, over into one corner of the large room. A round table was brought over from the salesmen's report writing room (used there more for surreptitious poker playing than for writing reports) and placed in the middle of my office—on the grounds that it had no sharp corners to gouge people in their middles if it got to cavorting about recklessly. In an industrial plant one always has to consider the matter of safety rules and accident insurance rates.

In the middle of the table there rested, with dark fluid gleaming through clear plastic cases, six fresh cylinders which Auerbach had prepared in his laboratory over in the plant.

Auerbach had shown considerable unwillingness to attend the seance; he pleaded being extra busy with experiments just now, but I gave him that look which told him I knew he had just been stalling around the last few months, the same as I had.

If the psi effect had never come out in the first place, there wouldn't have been any mental conflict. He could have gone on with his processes of refining, simplifying and increasing the efficiency ratings of his goop. But this unexpected side effect, the cylinders learning and demonstrating something he considered basically untrue, had tied his hands with a hopeless sort of frustration. He would have settled gladly for a chemical compound which could have added two and

two upon request; but when that compound can learn and demonstrate that there's no such thing as gravity, teaching it simple arithmetic is like ashes in the mouth.

I said as much to him. I stood there in his laboratory, leaned up against a work bench, and risked burning an acid hole in the sleeve of my jacket just to put over an air of unconcern. He was perched on the edge of an opposite work bench, swinging his feet, and hiding the expression in his eyes behind the window's reflection upon his polished glasses. I said even more.

"You know," I said reflectively, "I'm completely unable to understand the attitude of supposedly unbiased men of science. Now you take all that mass of data about psi effects, the odd and unexplainable happenings, the premonitions, the specific predictions, the accurate descriptions of far away simultaneously happening events. You take that whole mountainous mass of data, evidence, phenomena—"

A slight turn of his head gave me a glimpse of his eyes behind the glasses. He looked as if he wished I'd change the subject. In his dry, undemonstrative way, I think he liked me. Or at least he liked me when I wasn't trying to make him think about things outside his safe and secure little framework. But I didn't give in. If men of science are not going to take up the evidence and work it over, then where are we? And are they men of science?

"Before Rhine came along, and brought all this down to the level of laboratory experimentation," I pursued, "how were those things to be explained? Say a fellow had some unusual powers, things that happened around him, things he knew without any explanation for knowing them. I'll tell you. There were two courses open to him. He could express it in the semantics of spiritism, or he could admit to witchcraft and sorcery. Take your pick; those were the only two systems of semantics which had been built up through the ages.

"We've got a third one now—parapsychology. If I had asked you to attend an experiment in parapsychology, you'd have agreed at once. But when I ask you to attend a seance, you balk! Man, what difference does it make what we call it? Isn't it up to us to investigate the evidence wherever we find it? No matter what kind of semantic debris it's hiding in?"

Auerbach shoved himself down off the bench, and pulled out a beat-up package of cigarettes.

"All right, Kennedy," he had said resignedly, "I'll attend your seance."

The other invited guests were Sara, Lieutenant Murphy, Old Stone Face, myself, and, of course, the Swami. This was probably not typical of the Swami's usual audience composition.

Six chairs were placed at even intervals around the table. I had found soft white lights overhead to be most suitable for my occasional night work, but the Swami insisted that a blue light, a dim one, was most suitable for his night work.

I made no objection to that condition. One of the elementary basics of science is that laboratory conditions may be varied to meet the necessities of the experiment. If a red-lighted darkness is necessary to an operator's successful development of photographic film, then I could hardly object to a blue-lighted darkness for the development of the Swami's effects.

Neither could I object to the Swami's insistence that he sit with his back to the true North. When he came into the room, accompanied by Lieutenant Murphy, his thoughts seemed turned in upon himself, or wafted somewhere out of this world. He stopped in mid-stride, struck an attitude of listening, or feeling, perhaps, and slowly shifted his body back and forth.

"Ah," he said at last, in a tone of satisfaction, "there is the North!"

It was, but this was not particularly remarkable. There is no confusing maze of hallways leading to the Personnel Department from the outside. Applicants would be unable to find us if there were. If he had got his bearings out on the street, he could have managed to keep them.

He picked up the nearest chair with his own hands and shifted it so that it would be in tune with the magnetic lines of Earth. I couldn't object. The Chinese had insisted upon such placement of household articles, particularly their beds, long before the Earth's magnetism had been discovered by science. The birds had had their direction-finders attuned to it, long before there was man.

Instead of objecting, the lieutenant and I meekly picked up the table and shifted it to the new position. Sara and Auerbach came in as we were setting the table down. Auerbach gave one quick look at the Swami in his black cloak and nearly white turban, and then looked away.

"Remember semantics," I murmured to him, as I pulled out Sara's chair for her. I seated her to the left of the Swami. I seated Auerbach to the right of him. If the lieutenant was, by chance, in cahoots with the Swami, I would foil them to the extent of not letting them sit side by side at least. I sat down at the opposite side of the table from the Swami. The lieutenant sat down between me and Sara.

The general manager came through the door at that instant, and took charge immediately.

"All right now," Old Stone Face said crisply, in his low, rumbling voice, "no fiddle-faddling around. Let's get down to business."

The Swami closed his eyes.

"Please be seated," he intoned to Old Stone Face. "And now, let us all join hands in an unbroken circle."

Henry shot him a beetle-browed look as he sat down between Auerbach and me, but at least he was coöperative to the extent that he placed both his hands on top of the table. If Auerbach and I reached for them, we would be permitted to grasp them.

I leaned back and snapped off the overhead light to darken the room in an eerie, blue glow.

We sat there, holding hands, for a full ten minutes. Nothing happened.

It was not difficult to estimate the pattern of Henry's mind. Six persons, ten minutes, equals one man-hour. One man-hour of idle time to be charged into the cost figure of the antigrav unit. He was staring fixedly at the cylinders which lay in random positions in the center of the table, as if to assess their progress at this processing point. He apparently began to grow dissatisfied with the efficiency rating of the manufacturing process at this point. He stirred restlessly in his chair.

The Swami seemed to sense the impatience, or it might have been coincidence.

"There is some difficulty," he gasped in a strangulated, high voice. "My guides refuse to come through."

"Harrumph!" exclaimed Old Stone Face. It left no doubt about what he would do if his guides did not obey orders on the double.

"Someone in this circle is not a True Believer!" the Swami accused in an incredulous voice.

In the dim blue light I was able to catch a glimpse of Sara's face. She was on the verge of breaking apart. I managed to catch her eye and flash her a stern warning. Later she told me she had interpreted my expression as stark fear, but it served the same purpose. She smothered her laughter in a most unladylike sound somewhere between a snort and a squawk.

The Swami seemed to become aware that somehow he was not holding his audience spellbound.

"Wait!" he commanded urgently; then he announced in awe-stricken tones, "I feel a presence!"

There was a tentative, half-hearted rattle of some castanets—which could have been managed by the Swami wiggling one knee, if he happened to have them concealed there. This was followed by the thin squawk of a bugle—which could have been accomplished by sitting over toward one side and squashing the air out of a rubber bulb attached to a ten-cent party horn taped to his thigh.

Then there was nothing. Apparently his guides had made a tentative appearance and were, understandably, completely intimidated by Old Stone Face. We sat for another five minutes.

"Harrumph!" Henry cleared his throat again, this time louder and more commanding.

"That is all," the Swami said in a faint, exhausted voice. "I have returned to you on your material plane."

The handholding broke up in the way bits of metal, suddenly charged posi-

tive and negative, would fly apart. I leaned back again and snapped on the white lights. We all sat there a few seconds, blinking in what seemed a sudden glare.

The Swami sat with his chin dropped down to his chest. Then he raised stricken, liquid eyes.

"Oh, now I remember where I am," he said. "What happened? I never know."

Old Stone Face threw him a look of withering scorn. He picked up one of the cylinders and hefted it in the palm of his hand. It did not fly upward to bang against the ceiling. It weighed about what it ought to weigh. He tossed the cylinder contemptuously, back into the pile, scattering them over the table. He pushed back his chair, got to his feet, and stalked out of the room without looking at any of us.

The Swami made a determined effort to recapture the spotlight.

"I'm afraid I must have help to walk to the car," he whispered. "I am completely exhausted. Ah, this work takes so much out of me. Why do I go on with it? Why? Why? Why?"

He drooped in his chair, then made a valiantly brave effort to rise under his own power when he felt the lieutenant's hands lifting him up. He was leaning heavily on the lieutenant as they went out the door.

Sara looked at me dubiously.

"Will there be anything else?" she asked. Her tone suggested that since nothing had been accomplished, perhaps we should get some work out before she left.

"No, Sara," I answered. "Good night. See you in the morning."

She nodded and went out the door.

Apparently none of them had seen what I saw. I wondered if Auerbach had. He was a trained observer. He was standing beside the table looking down at the cylinders. He reached over and poked at one of them with his forefinger. He was pushing it back and forth. It gave him no resistance beyond normal inertia. He pushed it a little farther out of parallel with true North. It did not try to swing back.

So he had seen it. When I'd laid the cylinders down on the table they were in random positions. During the seance there had been no jarring of the table, not even so much as a rap or quiver which could have been caused by the Swami's lifted knee. When we'd shifted the table, after the Swami had changed his chair, the cylinders hadn't been disturbed. When Old Stone Face had been staring at them during the seance—seance?, hah!—they were laying in inert, random positions.

But when the lights came back on, and just before Henry had picked one up and tossed it back to scatter them, every cylinder had been laying in orderly parallel—and with one end pointing to true North!

I stood there beside Auerbach, and we both poked at the cylinders some

more. They gave us no resistance, nor showed that they had any ideas about it one way or the other.

"It's like so many things," I said morosely. "If you do just happen to notice anything out of the ordinary at all, it doesn't seem to mean anything."

"Maybe that's because you're judging it outside of its own framework," Auerbach answered. I couldn't tell whether he was being sarcastic or speculative. "What I don't understand," he went on, "is that once the cylinders having been activated by whatever force there was in action—all right, call it psi—well, why didn't they retain it, the way the other cylinders retained the antigrav force?"

I thought for a moment. Something about the conditional setup seemed to give me an idea.

"You take a photographic plate," I reasoned. "Give it a weak exposure to light, then give it a strong blast of overexposure. The first exposure is going to be blanked out by the second. Old Stone Face was feeling pretty strongly toward the whole matter."

Auerbach looked at me, unbelieving.

"There isn't any rule about who can have psi talent," I argued. "I'm just wondering if I shouldn't wire General Sanfordwaithe and tell him to cut our order for poltergeists down to five."

I spent a glum, restless night. I knew, with certainty, that Old Stone Face was going to give me trouble. I didn't need any psi talent for that, it was an inevitable part of his pattern. He had made up his mind to take charge of this antigrav operation, and he wouldn't let one bogus seance stop him more than momentarily.

If it weren't so close to direct interference with my department, I'd have been delighted to sit on the side lines and watch him try to command psi effects to happen. That would be like commanding some random copper wire and metallic cores to start generating electricity.

For once I could have overlooked the interference with my department if I didn't know, from past experience, that I'd be blamed for the consequent failure. That's a cute little trick of top executives, generally. They get into something they don't understand, really louse it up, then, because it is your department, you are the one who failed. Ordinarily I liked my job, but if this sort of thing went too far—

But more than saving my job, I had the feeling that if I were allowed to go along, carefully and experimentally, I just might discover a few of the laws about psi. There was the tantalizing feeling that I was on the verge of knowing at least something.

The Pentagon people had been right. The Swami was an obvious phony of the baldest fakery, yet he had something. He had something, but how was I to get hold of it? Just what kind of turns with what around what did you make to generate a psi force? It took two thousand years for man to move from the concept that

amber was a stone with a soul to the concept of static electricity. Was there any chance I could find some shortcuts in reducing the laws governing psi? The one bright spot of my morning was that Auerbach hadn't denied seeing the evidence of the cylinders pointing North.

It turned out to be the only bright spot. I had no more than got to my office and sorted out the routine urgencies which had to be handled immediately from those which could be put off a little longer, when Sara announced the lieutenant and the Swami. So I put everything else off, and told her to send them right in.

The Swami was in an incoherent rage. The lieutenant was contracting his eyebrows in a scowl and clenching his fists in frustration. In a voice, soaring into the falsetto, the Swami demanded that he be sent back to Brooklyn where he was appreciated. The lieutenant had orders to stay with the Swami, but he didn't have any orders about returning either to Brooklyn or the Pentagon. I managed, at last, to get the lieutenant seated in a straight chair, but the Swami couldn't stay still long enough. He stalked up and down the room, swirling his slightly odorous black cloak on the turns. Gradually the story came out.

Old Stone Face, a strong advocate of Do It Now, hadn't wasted any time. From his home he had called the Swami at his hotel and commanded him to report to the general manager's office at once. Apparently they both got there about the same time, and Henry had waded right in.

Apparently Henry, too, had spent a restless night. He accused the Swami of inefficiency, bungling, fraud, deliberate insubordination, and a few other assorted faults for having made a fool out of us all at the seance. He'd as much as commanded the Swami to cut out all this shilly-shallying and get down to the business of activating antigrav cylinders, or else. He hadn't been specific about what the "or else" would entail.

It was up to me to pick up the pieces, if I could.

"Now I'm sure he really didn't mean—" I began to pour oil on the troubled waters. "With your deep insight, Swami—The fate of great martyrs throughout the ages—" Gradually the ego-building phrases calmed him down. He grew willing to listen, if for no more than the anticipation of hearing more of them.

He settled down into the crying chair at last, and I could see his valence shifting from outraged anger to a vast and noble forgiveness. This much was not difficult. To get him to coöperate, consciously and enthusiastically, well that might not be so easy.

Each trade has its own special techniques. The analytical chemist has a series of routines he tries when he wishes to reduce an unknown compound to its constituents. To the chemically uneducated, this may appear to be a fumbling, hit or miss, kind of procedure. The personnel man, too, has his series of techniques. It may appear to be no more than random, pointless conversation.

I first tried the routine process of reasoning. I didn't expect it to work; it seldom does, but it can't be eliminated until it has been tested.

"You must understand," I said slowly, soothingly, "that our intentions are constructive. We are simply trying to apply the scientific method to something which has, heretofore, been wrapped in mysticism."

The shocked freezing of his facial muscles told me that reasoning had missed its mark. It told me more.

"Science understands nothing, nothing at all!" he snapped, "Science tries to reduce everything to test tubes and formulae; but I am the instrument of a mystery which man can never know."

"Well, now," I said reasonably. "Let us not be inconsistent. You say this is something man was not meant to know; yet you, yourself, have devoted your life to gaining a greater comprehension of it."

"I seek only to rise above my material self so that I might place myself in harmony with the flowing symphony of Absolute Truth," he lectured me sonorously. Oh well, his enrapture-ment with such terminology differed little from some of the sciences which tended to grow equally esoteric. And maybe it meant something. Who was I to say that mine ears alone heard all the music being played?

It did mean one thing very specifically. There are two basic approaches to the meaning of life and the universe about us. Man can know: That is the approach of science, its whole meaning. There are mysteries which man was not meant to know: That is the other approach. There is no reconciling of the two on a reasoning basis. I represented the former. I wasn't sure the Swami was a true representative of the latter, but at least he had picked up the valence and the phrases.

I made a mental note that reasoning was an unworkable technique with this compound. Henry, a past master at it, had already tried threats and abuse. That hadn't worked. I next tried one of the oldest forms in the teaching of man, a parable.

I told him of my old Aunt Dimity, who was passionately fond of Rummy, but considered all other card games sinful.

"Ah, how well she proves my point," the Swami countered. "There is an inner voice, a wisdom greater than the mortal mind to guide us—"

"Well now," I asked reasonably, "why would the inner voice say that Rummy was O.K., but Casino wasn't?" But it was obvious he liked the point he had made better than he had liked the one I failed to make.

So I tried the next technique. I tried an appeal for instruction. Often an opponent will come over to your side if you just confess, honestly, that he is a better man than you are, and you need his help. What was the road I must take to achieve the same understanding he had achieved? His eyes glittered at that, and a mercenary expression underlay the tone of his answer.

"First there is fasting, and breathing, and contemplating self," he murmured mendaciously. "I would be unable to aid you until you gave me full ascendancy over you, so that I might guide your every thought—"

I decided to try inspiration. In breaking down recalcitrant materials in the laboratory of my personnel office, sometimes one method worked, sometimes another.

"Do you realize, Swami," I asked, "that the one great drawback throughout the ages to a full acceptance of psi is the lack of permanent evidence? It has always been evanescent, perishable. It always rests solely upon the word of witnesses. But if I could show you a film print, then you could not doubt the existence of photography, could you?"

I opened my lower desk drawer and pulled out a couple of the Auerbach cylinders which we had used the night before. I laid them on top of the desk.

"These cylinders," I said, "act like the photographic film. They will record, in permanent form, the psi effects you command. At last, for all mankind the doubt will be stilled; man will at once know the truth; and you will take your place among the immortals."

I thought it was pretty good, and that, with his overweening ego, it would surely do the trick. But the Swami was staring at the cylinders first in fascination, then fear, then in horror. He jumped to his feet, without bothering to swirl his robe majestically, rushed over to the door, fumbled with the knob as if he were in a burning room, managed to get the door open, and rushed outside. The lieutenant gave me a puzzled look, and went after him.

I drew a deep breath, and exhaled it audibly. My testing procedures hadn't produced the results I'd expected, but the last one had revealed something else.

The Swami believed himself to be a fraud!

As long as he could razzle-dazzle with sonorous phrases, and depend upon credulous old women to turn them into accurate predictions of things to come, he was safe enough. But faced with something which would prove definitely—

Well, what would he do now?

And then I noticed that both cylinders were pointing toward the door. I watched them, at first, not quite sure; then I grew convinced by the change in their perspective with the angles of the desk. Almost as slowly as the minute hand of a watch, they were creeping across the desk toward the door. They, too, were trying to escape from the room.

I nudged them with my fingers. They hustled along a little faster, as if appreciative of the help, even coming from me. I saw they were moving faster, as if they were learning as they tried it. I turned one of them around. Slowly it turned back and headed for the door again. I lifted one of them to the floor. It had no tendency to float, but it kept heading for the door. The other one fell off the desk

while I was fooling with the first one. The jar didn't seem to bother it any. It, too, began to creep across the rug toward the door.

I opened the door for them. Sara looked up. She saw the two cylinders come into view, moving under their own power.

"Here we go again," she said, resignedly.

The two cylinders pushed themselves over the door sill, got clear outside my office. Then they went inert. Both Sara and I tried nudging them, poking them. They just lay there; mission accomplished. I carried them back inside my office and lay them on the floor. Immediately both of them began to head for the door again.

"Simple," Sara said dryly, "they just can't stand to be in the same room with you, that's all."

"You're not just whistling, gal," I answered. "That's the whole point."

"Have I said something clever?" she asked seriously.

I took the cylinders back into my office and put them in a desk drawer. I watched the desk for a while, but it didn't change position. Apparently it was too heavy for the weak force activating the cylinders.

I picked up the phone and called Old Stone Face. I told him about the cylinders.

"There!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "I knew all that fellow needed was a good old-fashioned talking to. Some day, my boy, you'll realize that you still have a lot to learn about handling men."

"Yes, sir," I answered.

Sara asked me if I were ready to start seeing people, and I told her I wasn't, that I had some thinking to do. She quipped something about making the world wait, meaning that I should be occupying my time with personnel managing, and closed the door.

At that, Old Stone Face had a point. If he hadn't got in and riled things up, maybe the Swami would not have been emotionally upset enough to generate the psi force which had activated these new cylinders.

What was I saying? That psi was linked with emotional upheaval? Well, maybe. Not necessarily, but Rhine had proved that strength of desire had an effect upon the frequency index of telekinesis. Was there anything at all we knew about psi, so that we could start cataloguing, sketching in the beginnings of a pattern? Yes, of course there was.

First, it existed. No one could dismiss the mountainous mass of evidence unless he just refused to think about the subject.

Second, we could, in time, know what it was and how it worked. You'd have to give up the entire basis of scientific attitude if you didn't admit that.

Third, it acted like a sense, rather than as something dependent upon the intellectual process of thought. You could, for example—I argued to my imaginary listener—command your nose to smell a rose, and by autosuggestion you might think you were succeeding; that is, until you really did smell a real rose, then you'd know that you'd failed to create it through a thought pattern. The sense would have to be separated from the process of thinking about the sense.

So what was psi? But, at this point, did it matter much? Wasn't the main issue one of learning how to produce it, use it? How long did we work with electricity and get a lot of benefits from it before we formed some theories about what it was? And, for that matter, did we know what it was, even yet? "A flow of electrons" was a pretty meaningless phrase, when you stopped to think about it. I could say psi was a flow of positrons, and it would mean as much.

I reached over and picked up a cigarette. I started fumbling around in the center drawer of my desk for a matchbook. I didn't find any. Without thinking, I opened the drawer containing the two cylinders. They were pressing up against the side of the desk drawer, still trying to get out of the room. Single purposed little beasts, weren't they?

I closed the drawer, and noticed that I was crushing out my cigarette in the ash tray, just as if I'd smoked it. It was the first overt indication I'd had that maybe my nerves weren't all they should be this morning.

The sight of the cylinders brought up the fourth point. Experimental psychology was filled with examples of the known senses being unable to make correct evaluations when confronted with a totally new object, color, scent, taste, sound, impression. It was necessary to have a point of orientation before the new could be fitted into the old. What we really lacked in psi was the ability to orient its phenomena. The various psi gifted individuals tried to do this. If they believed in guides from beyond the veil, that's the way they expressed themselves. On the other hand, a Rhine card caller might not be able to give you a message from your dear departed Aunt Minnie if his life depended upon it—yet it could easily be the same force working in both instances. Consequently, a medium, such as the Swami, whose basic belief was There Are Mysteries, would be unable to function in a framework where the obvious intent was to unveil those mysteries!

That brought up a couple more points. I felt pretty sure of them. I felt as if I were really getting somewhere. And I had a situation which was ideal for proving my points.

I flipped the intercom key, and spoke to Sara.

"Will you arrange with her foreman for Annie Malasek to come to my office right now?" I asked. Sara is flippant when things are going along all right, but she knows when to buckle down and do what she's asked. She gave me no personal reactions to this request.

Yes, Annie Malasek would be a good one. If anybody in the plant believed There Are Mysteries, it would be Annie. Further, she was exaggeratedly loyal to me. She believed I was responsible for turning her little Jennie, the little girl who'd started all this poltergeist trouble, into a Good Little Girl. In this instance, I had no qualms about taking advantage of that loyalty.

While I waited for her I called the lieutenant at his hotel. He was in. Yes, the Swami was also in. They'd just returned. Yes, the Swami was ranting and raving about leaving Los Angeles at once. He had said he absolutely would have nothing more to do with us here at Computer Research. I told Lieutenant Murphy to scare him with tales of the secret, underground working of Army Intelligence, to quiet him down. And I scared the lieutenant a little by pointing out that holding a civilian against his will without the proper writ was tantamount to kidnapping. So if the Army didn't want trouble with the Civil Courts, all brought about because the lieutenant didn't know how to handle his man—

The lieutenant became immediately anxious to coöperate with me. So then I soothed him. I told him that, naturally, the Swami was unhappy. He was used to Swami-ing, and out here he had been stifled, frustrated. What he needed was some credulous women to catch their breath at his awe-inspiring insight and gaze with fearful rapture into his eyes. The lieutenant didn't know where he could find any women like that. I told him, dryly, that I would furnish some.

Annie was more than coöperative. Sure, the whole plant was buzzing about that foreign-looking Swami who had been seen coming in and out of my office. Sure, a lot of the Girls believed in seances.

"Why? Don't you, Mr. Kennedy?" she asked curiously.

I said I wasn't sure, and she clucked her tongue in sympathy. It must be terrible not to be sure, so ... well, it must be just terrible. And I was such a kind man, too. I didn't quite get the connection, until I remembered there are some patterns which believe a human being would be incapable of being kind unless through hope of reward or fear of punishment.

But when I asked her to go to the hotel and persuade the Swami to give her a reading, she was reluctant. I thought my plan was going to be frustrated, but it turned out that her reluctance was only because she did not have a thing to wear, going into a high-toned place like that.

Sara wasn't the right size, but one of the older girls in the outer office would lend Annie some clothes if I would let her go see the Swami, too. It developed that her own teacher was a guest of Los Angeles County for a while, purely on a trumped-up charge, you understand, Mr. Kennedy. Not that she was a cop hater or anything like that. She was perfectly aware of what a fine and splendid job those noble boys in blue did for us all, but—

In my own office! Well, you never knew.

Yet, what was the difference between her and me? We were both trying to get hold of and benefit by psi effects, weren't we? So I didn't comment. Instead, I found myself much farther ahead with my tentative plans than I'd anticipated at this stage.

Yes, my interviewer's teacher had quite a large following, and now they were all at loose ends. If the Swami were willing, she could provide a large and ready-made audience for him. She would be glad to talk to him about it.

Annie hurriedly said that she would be glad to talk to him about it, too; that she could get up a large audience, too. So, even before it got started, I had my rival factions at work. I egged them both on, and promised that I'd get Army Intelligence to work with the local boys in blue to hold off making any raids.

Annie told me again what a kind man I was. My interviewer spoke up quickly and said how glad she was to find an opportunity for expressing how grateful she was for the privilege of working right in the same department with such an understanding, really intellectually developed adult. She eyed Annie sidelong, as if to gauge the effects of her attempts to set me up on a pedestal, out of Annie's reach.

I hoped I wouldn't start believing either one of them. I hoped I wasn't as inaccurate in my estimates of people as was my interviewer. I wondered if she were really qualified for the job she held. Then I realized this was a contest between two women and I, a mere male, was simply being used as the pawn. Well, that worked both ways. In a fair bargain both sides receive satisfaction. I felt a little easier about my tactical maneuvers.

But the development of rivalry between factions of the audience gave me an additional idea. Perhaps that's what the Swami really needed, a little rivalry. Perhaps he was being a little too hard to crack because he knew he was the only egg in the basket.

I called Old Stone Face and told him what I planned. He responded that it was up to me. He'd stepped in and got things under way for me, got things going, now it was my job to keep them going. It looked as if he were edging out from under—or maybe he really believed that.

Before I settled into the day's regular routine, I wired General Sanfordwaithe, and told him that if he had any more prospects ready would he please ship me one at once, via air mail, special delivery.

The recital hall, hired for the Swami's Los Angeles debut, was large enough to accommodate all the family friends and relatives of any little Maribel who, having mastered "Daffodils In May," for four fingers, was being given to the World. It had the usual small stage equipped with pull-back curtains to give a dramatic flourish, or to shut off from view the effects of any sudden nervous catastrophe brought about by stage fright.

I got there, purposely a little late, in hopes the house lights would already

be dimmed and everything in progress; but about a hundred and fifty people were milling around outside on the walk and in the corridors. Both factions had really been busy.

Most of them were women, but, to my intense relief, there were a few men. Some of these were only husbands, but a few of the men wore a look which said they'd been far away for a long time. Somehow I got the impression that instead of looking into a crystal ball, they would be more inclined to look out of one.

It was a little disconcerting to realize that no one noticed me, or seemed to think I was any different from anybody else. I supposed I should be thankful that I wasn't attracting any attention. I saw my interviewer amid a group of Older Girls. She winked at me roguishly, and patted her heavy handbag significantly. As per instructions, she was carrying a couple of the Auerbach cylinders.

I found myself staring in perplexity for a full minute at another woman, before I realized it was Annie. I had never seen her before, except dressed in factory blue jeans, man's blue shirt, and a bandanna wrapped around her head. Her companion, probably another of the factory assemblers, nudged her and pointed, not too subtly, in my direction. Annie saw me then, and lit up with a big smile. She started toward me, hesitated when I frowned and shook my head, flushed with the thought that I didn't want to speak to her in public; then got a flash of better sense than that. She, too, gave me a conspiratorial wink and patted her handbag.

My confederates were doing nicely.

Almost immediately thereafter a horse-faced, mustached old gal started rounding people up in a honey sweet, pear shaped voice; and herded them into the auditorium. I chose one of the wooden folding chairs in the back row.

A heavy jowled old gal came out in front of the closed curtains and gave a little introductory talk about how lucky we all were that the Swami had consented to visit with us. There was the usual warning to anyone who was not of the esoteric that we must not expect too much, that sometimes nothing at all happened, that true believers did not attend just to see effects. She reminded us kittenishly that the guides were capricious, and that we must all help by merging ourselves in the great flowing currents of absolute infinity.

She finally faltered, realized she was probably saying all the things the Swami would want to say—in the manner of people who introduce speakers everywhere—and with a girlish little flourish she waved at someone off stage.

The house lights dimmed. The curtains swirled up and back.

The Swami was doing all right for himself. He was seated behind a small table in the center of the stage. A pale violet light diffused through a huge crystal ball on the table, and threw his dark features into sharp relief. It gave an astonishingly remote and inscrutable wisdom to his features. In the pale light, and at this distance, his turban looked quite clean.

He began to speak slowly and sonorously. A hush settled over the audience, and gradually I felt myself merging with the mass reaction of the rest. As I listened, I got the feeling that what he was saying was of tremendous importance, that somehow his words contained great and revealing wonders—or would contain them if I were only sufficiently advanced to comprehend their true meanings. The man was good, he knew his trade. All men search for truth at one level or another. I began to realize why such a proportionate few choose the cold and impersonal laboratory. Perhaps if there were a way to put science to music—

The Swami talked on for about twenty minutes, and then I noticed his voice had grown deeper and deeper in tone, and suddenly, without any apparent transition, we all knew it was not really the Swami's voice we were hearing. And then he began to tell members of the audience little intimate things about themselves, things which only they should know.

He was good at this, too. He had mastered the trick of making universals sound like specifics. I could do the same thing. The patterns of people's lives have multiple similarities. To a far greater extent than generally realized the same things happen to everyone. The idea was to take some of the lesser known ones and word them so they seemed to apply to one isolated individual.

For instance, I could tell a fellow about when he was a little boy there was a little girl in a red dress with blond pigtails who used to scrap with him and tattle things about him to her mother. If he were inclined to be credulous, this was second sight I had. But it is a universal. What average boy didn't, at one time or another, know a little girl with blond pigtails? What blond little girl didn't occasionally wear a red dress? What little girl didn't tattle to her mother about the naughty things the boys were doing?

The Swami did that for a while. The audience was leaning forward in a rapture of ecstasy. First the organ tones of his voice soothed and softened. The phrases which should mean something if only you had the comprehension. The universals applied as specifics. He had his audience in the palm of his hand. He didn't need his crystal ball to tell him that.

But he wanted it to be complete. Most of the responses had been from women. He gave them the generalities which didn't sound like generalities. They confirmed with specifics. But most were women. He wanted the men, too. He began to concentrate on the men. He made it easy.

"I have a message," he said. "From ... now let me get it right ... from R. S. It is for a man in this audience. Will the man who knew R. S. acknowledge?"

There was a silence. And that was such an easy one, too. I hadn't planned to participate, but, on impulse, since none of the other men were cooperating, I spoke up.

"Robert Smith!" I exclaimed. "Good old Bob!"

Several of the women sitting near me looked at me and beamed their approval. One of the husbands scowled at me.

"I can tell by your tone," the Swami said, and apparently he hadn't recognized my tone, "that you have forgiven him. That is the message. He wants you to know that he is happy. He is much wiser now. He knows now that he was wrong."

One of the women reached over and patted me on the shoulder, giving me motherly encouragement.

But the Swami had no more messages for men. He was smart enough to know where to stop. He'd tried one of the simplest come-ons, and there had been too much of a pause. It had almost not come off.

I wondered who good old Bob Smith was? Surely, among the thousands of applicants I'd interviewed, there must have been a number of them. And, being applicants, of course some of them had been wrong.

The Swami's tones, giving one message after another—faster and faster now, not waiting for acknowledgment or confirmation—began to sink into a whisper. His speech became ragged, heavy. The words became indistinguishable. About his head there began to float a pale, luminescent sphere. There was a subdued gasp from the audience and then complete stillness. As though, unbreathing, in the depths of a tomb, they watched the sphere. It bobbed about, over the Swami's head and around him. At times it seemed as if about to float off stage, but it came back. It swirled out over the audience, but not too far, and never at such an angle that the long, flexible dull black wire supporting it would be silhouetted against the glowing crystal ball.

Then it happened. There was a gasp, a smothered scream. And over at one side of the auditorium a dark object began bobbing about in the air up near the ceiling. It swerved and swooped. The Swami's luminescent sphere jerked to a sudden stop. The Swami sat with open mouth and stared at the dark object which he was not controlling.

The dark object was not confined to any dull black wire. It went where it willed. It went too high and brushed against the ceiling.

There was a sudden shower of coins to the floor. A compact hit the floor with a flat spat. A handkerchief floated down more slowly.

"My purse!" a woman gasped. I recognized my interviewer's voice. Her purse contained two Auerbach cylinders, and they were having themselves a ball.

In alarm, I looked quickly at the stage, hoping the Swami wasn't astute enough to catch on. But he was gone. The audience, watching the bobbing purse, hadn't realized it as yet. And they were delayed in realizing it by a diversion from the other side of the auditorium.

"I can't hold it down any longer, Mr. Kennedy!" a woman gasped out. "It's taking me up into the air!"

"Hold on, Annie!" I shouted back. "I'm coming!"

A chastened and subdued Swami sat in my office the following morning, and this time he was inclined to be coöperative. More, he was looking to me for guidance, understanding, and didn't mind acknowledging my ascendancy. And, with the lieutenant left in the outer office, he didn't have any face to preserve.

Later, last night, he'd learned the truth of what happened after he had run away in a panic. I'd left a call at the hotel for the lieutenant. When the lieutenant had got him calmed down and returned my call, I'd instructed the lieutenant to tell the Swami about the Auerbach cylinders; to tell the Swami he was not a fake after all.

The Swami had obviously spent a sleepless night. It is a terrible thing to have spent years perfecting the art of fakery, and then to realize you needn't have faked at all. More terrible, he had swallowed some of his own medicine, and was overcome with fear of the forces which he had been commanding. All through the night he had shivered in fear of some instant and horrible retaliation. For him it was still a case of There Are Mysteries.

And it was of no comfort to his state of mind right now that the four cylinders we had finally captured last night were, at this moment, bobbing about in my office, swooping and swerving around in the upper part of the room, like bats trying to find some opening. I was giving him the full treatment! The first two cylinders, down on the floor, were pressing up against my closed door, like frightened little things trying to escape a room of horror.

The Swami's face was twitching, and his long fingers kept twining themselves into King's X symbols. But he was sitting it out. He was swallowing some of the hair of the dog that bit him. I had to give him A for that.

"I've been trying to build up a concept of the framework wherein psi seems to function," I told him casually, just as if it were all a formularized laboratory procedure. "I had to pull last night's stunt to prove something."

He tore his eyes away from the cylinders which were over exploring one corner of the ceiling, and looked at me.

"Let's go to electricity," I said speculatively. "Not that we know psi and electricity have anything in common, other than some similar analogies, but we don't know they don't. Both of them may be just different manifestations of the same thing. We don't really know why a magnetized core, turning inside a coil of copper wire, generates electricity.

"Oh we've got some phrases," I acknowledged. "We've got a whole structure of phrases, and when you listen to them they sound as if they ought to mean something—like the phrases you were using last night. Everybody assumes they do mean something to the pundits. So, since it is human to want to be a pundit, we repeat these phrases over and over, and call them explanations. Yet we do know

what happens, even if we do just theorize about why. We know how to wrap something around something and get electricity.

"Take the induction coil," I said. "We feed a low-voltage current into one end, and we draw off a high-voltage current from the other. But anyone who wants, any time, can disprove the whole principle of the induction coil. All you have to do is wrap your core with a nonconductor, say nylon thread, and presto, nothing comes out. You see, it doesn't work; and anybody who claims it does is a faker and a liar. That's what happens when science tries to investigate psi by the standard methods.

"You surround a psi-gifted individual with nonbelievers, and probably nothing will come out of it. Surround him with true believers; and it all seems to act like an induction coil. Things happen. Yet even when things do happen, it is usually impossible to prove it.

"Take yourself, Swami. And this is significant. First we have the north point effect. Then those two little beggars trying to get out the door. Then the ones which are bobbing around up there. Without the cylinders there would have been no way to know that anything had happened at all.

"Now, about this psi framework. It isn't something you can turn on and off, at will. We don't know enough yet for that. Aside from some believers and those individuals who do seem to attract psi forces, we don't know, yet, what to wrap around what. So, here's what you're to do: You're to keep a supply of these cylinders near you at all times. If any psi effects happen, they'll record it. Fair enough?

"Now," I said with finality. "I have anticipated that you might refuse. But you're not the only person who has psi ability. I've wired General Sanfordwaithe to send me another fellow; one who will coöperate."

The Swami thought it over. Here he was with a suite in a good hotel; with an army lieutenant to look after his earthly needs; on the payroll of a respectable company; with a ready-made flock of believers; and no fear of the bunco squad. He had never had it so good. The side money, for private readings alone, should be substantial.

Further, and he watched me narrowly, I didn't seem to be afraid of the cylinders. It was probably this which gave the clincher.

"I'll coöperate," he agreed meekly.

For three days there was nothing. The Swami seemed coöperative enough. He called me a couple times a day and reported that the cylinders just lay around his room. I didn't know what to tell him. I recommended he read biographies of famous mediums. I recommended fasting, and breathing, and contemplating self. He seemed dubious, but said he'd try it.

On the morning of the third day, Sara called me on the intercom and told me there was another Army lieutenant in her office, and another charac ... another

gentleman. I opened my door and went out to Sara's office to greet them. My first glimpse told me Sara had been right the first time. He was a character.

The new lieutenant was no more than the standard output from the same production line as Lieutenant Murphy, but the wizened little old man he had in tow was from a different and much rarer matrix. As fast as I had moved, I was none too soon. The character reached over and tilted up Sara's chin as I was coming through the door.

"Now you're a healthy young wench," he said with a leer. "What are you doing tonight, baby?" The guy was at least eighty years old.

"Hey, you, pop!" I exclaimed in anger. "Be your age!"

He turned around and looked me up and down.

"I'm younger, that way, than you are, right now!" he snapped.

A disturbance in the outer office kept me from thinking up a retort. There were some subdued screams, some scuffling of heavy shoes, the sounds of some running feet as applicants got away. The outer door to Sara's office was flung open.

Framed in the doorway, breast high, floated the Swami!

He was sitting, cross-legged, on a hotel bathmat. From both front corners, where they had been attached by loops of twine, there peeked Auerbach cylinders. Two more rear cylinders were grasped in Lieutenant Murphy's strong hands. He was propelling the Swami along, mid air, in Atlantic City Boardwalk style.

The Swami looked down at us with aloof disdain, then his eyes focused on the old man. His glance wavered; he threw a startled and fearful look at the cylinders holding up his bathmat. They did not fall. A vast relief overspread his face, and he drew himself erect with more disdain than ever. The old man was not so aloof.

"Harry Glotz!" he exclaimed. "Why you ... you faker! What are you doing in that getup?"

The Swami took a casual turn about the room, leaning to one side on his magic carpet as if banking an airplane.

"Peasant!" He spat the word out and motioned grandly toward the door. Lieutenant Murphy pushed him through.

"Why, that no good bum!" the old man shouted at me. "That no-good from nowhere! I'll fix him! Thinks he's something, does he? I'll show him! Anything he can do I can do better!"

His rage got the better of him. He rushed through the door, shaking both fists above his white head, shouting imprecations, threats, and pleading to be shown how the trick was done, all in the same breath. The new lieutenant cast a stricken look at us and then sped after his charge.

"Looks as if we're finally in production," I said to Sara.

"That's only the second one," she said mournfully. "When you get all six of them, this joint's sure going to be jumping!"

I looked out of her window at the steel and concrete walls of the factory. They were solid, real, secure; they were a symbol of reality, the old reality a man could understand.

"I hope you don't mean that literally, Sara," I answered dubiously.

TEMPLE TROUBLE

Miracles to order was a fine way for the paratimers to get mining concessions—but Nature can sometimes pull counter-miracles. And so can men, for that matter....

Through a haze of incense and altar smoke, Yat-Zar looked down from his golden throne at the end of the dusky, many-pillared temple. Yat-Zar was an idol, of gigantic size and extraordinarily good workmanship; he had three eyes, made of turquoises as big as doorknobs, and six arms. In his three right hands, from top to bottom, he held a sword with a flame-shaped blade, a jeweled object of vaguely phallic appearance, and, by the ears, a rabbit. In his left hands were a bronze torch with burnished copper flames, a big goblet, and a pair of scales with an egg in one pan balanced against a skull in the other. He had a long bifurcate beard made of gold wire, feet like a bird's, and other rather startling anatomical features. His throne was set upon a stone plinth about twenty feet high, into the front of which a doorway opened; behind him was a wooden screen, elaborately gilded and painted.

Directly in front of the idol, Ghullam the high priest knelt on a big blue and gold cushion. He wore a gold-fringed robe of dark blue, and a tall conical gold miter, and a bright blue false beard, forked like the idol's golden one: he was intoning a prayer, and holding up, in both hands, for divine inspection and approval, a long curved knife. Behind him, about thirty feel away, stood a square stone altar, around which four of the lesser priests, in light blue robes with less gold fringe and dark-blue false beards, were busy with the preliminaries to the sacrifice. At considerable distance, about halfway down the length of the temple, some two hundred worshipers—a few substantial citizens in gold-fringed tunics, artisans in tunics without gold fringe, soldiers in mail hauberks and plain steel caps, one officer in ornately gilded armor, a number of peasants in nondescript smocks, and women of all classes—were beginning to prostrate themselves on the stone floor.

Ghullam rose to his feet, bowing deeply to Yat-Zar and holding the knife extended in front of him, and backed away toward the altar. As he did, one of the lesser priests reached into a fringed and embroidered sack and pulled out a live rabbit, a big one, obviously of domestic breed, holding it by the ears while one of his fellows took it by the hind legs. A third priest caught up a silver pitcher, while the fourth fanned the altar fire with a sheet-silver fan. As they began chanting antiphonally, Ghullam turned and quickly whipped the edge of his knife across the rabbit's throat. The priest with the pitcher stepped in to catch the blood, and when the rabbit was bled, it was laid on the fire. Ghullam and his four assistants all shouted together, and the congregation shouted in response.

The high priest waited as long as was decently necessary and then, holding the knife in front of him, stepped around the prayer-cushion and went through the door under the idol into the Holy of Holies. A boy in novice's white robes met him and took the knife, carrying it reverently to a fountain for washing. Eight or ten under-priests, sitting at a long table, rose and bowed, then sat down again and resumed their eating and drinking. At another table, a half-dozen upper priests nodded to him in casual greeting.

Crossing the room, Ghullam went to the Triple Veil in front of the House of Yat-Zar, where only the highest of the priesthood might go, and parted the curtains, passing through, until he came to the great gilded door. Here he fumbled under his robe and produced a small object like a mechanical pencil, inserting the pointed end in a tiny hole in the door and pressing on the other end. The door opened, then swung shut behind him, and as it locked itself, the lights came on within. Ghullam removed his miter and his false beard, tossing them aside on a table, then undid his sash and peeled out of his robe. His regalia discarded, he stood for a moment in loose trousers and a soft white shirt, with a pistollike weapon in a shoulder holster under his left arm—no longer Ghullam the high priest of Yat-Zar, but now Stranor Sleth, resident agent on this time-line of the Fourth Level Proto-Aryan Sector for the Transtemporal Mining Corporation. Then he opened a door at the other side of the anteroom and went to the antigrav shaft, stepping over the edge and floating downward.

There were temples of Yat-Zar on every time-line of the Proto-Aryan Sector, for the worship of Yat-Zar was ancient among the Hulgun people of that area of paratime, but there were only a few which had such installations as this, and all of them were owned and operated by Transtemporal Mining, which had the fissionable ores franchise for this sector. During the ten elapsed centuries since Transtemporal had begun operations on this sector, the process had become standardized. A few First Level paratimers would transpose to a selected time-line and abduct an upper-priest of Yat-Zar, preferably the high priest of the temple at Yoldav or Zurb. He would be drugged and transposed to the First Level, where he would receive hypnotic indoctrination and, while unconscious, have an operation

performed on his ears which would enable him to hear sounds well above the normal audible range. He would be able to hear the shrill sonar-cries of bats, for instance, and, more important, he would be able to hear voices when the speaker used a First Level audio-frequency step-up phone. He would also receive a memory-obliteration from the moment of his abduction, and a set of pseudo-memories of a visit to the Heaven of Yat-Zar, on the other side of the sky. Then he would be returned to his own time-line and left on a mountain top far from his temple, where an unknown peasant, leading a donkey, would always find him, return him to the temple, and then vanish inexplicably.

Then the priest would begin hearing voices, usually while serving at the altar. They would warn of future events, which would always come to pass exactly as foretold. Or they might bring tidings of things happening at a distance, the news of which would not arrive by normal means for days or even weeks. Before long, the holy man who had been carried alive to the Heaven of Yat-Zar would acquire a most awesome reputation as a prophet, and would speedily rise to the very top of the priestly hierarchy.

Then he would receive two commandments from Yat-Zar. The first would ordain that all lower priests must travel about from temple to temple, never staying longer than a year at any one place. This would insure a steady influx of newcomers personally unknown to the local upper-priests, and many of them would be First Level paratimers. Then, there would be a second commandment: A house must be built for Yat-Zar, against the rear wall of each temple. Its dimensions were minutely stipulated; its walls were to be of stone, without windows, and there was to be a single door, opening into the Holy of Holies, and before the walls were finished, the door was to be barred from within. A triple veil of brocaded fabric was to be hung in front of this door. Sometimes such innovations met with opposition from the more conservative members of the hierarchy: when they did, the principal objector would be seized with a sudden and violent illness; he would recover if and when he withdrew his objections.

Very shortly after the House of Yat-Zar would be completed, strange noises would be heard from behind the thick walls. Then, after a while, one of the younger priests would announce that he had been commanded in a vision to go behind the veil and knock upon the door. Going behind the curtains, he would use his door-activator to let himself in, and return by paratime-conveyer to the First Level to enjoy a well-earned vacation. When the high priest would follow him behind the veil, after a few hours, and find that he had vanished, it would be announced as a miracle. A week later, an even greater miracle would be announced. The young priest would return from behind the Triple Veil, clad in such raiment as no man had ever seen, and bearing in his hands a strange box. He would announce that Yat-Zar had commanded him to build a new temple in the mountains, at a place to be made known by the voice of the god speaking out of the box.

This time, there would be no doubts and no objections. A procession would set out, headed by the new revelator bearing the box, and when the clicking voice of the god spoke rapidly out of it, the site would be marked and work would begin. No local labor would ever be employed on such temples; the masons and woodworkers would be strangers, come from afar and speaking a strange tongue, and when the temple was completed, they would never be seen to leave it. Men would say that they had been put to death by the priest and buried under the altar to preserve the secrets of the god. And there would always be an idol to preserve the secrets of the god. And there would always be an idol of Yat-Zar, obviously of heavenly origin, since its workmanship was beyond the powers of any local craftsman. The priests of such a temple would be exempt, by divine decree, from the rule of yearly travel.

Nobody, of course, would have the least idea that there was a uranium mine in operation under it, shipping ore to another time-line. The Hulgun people knew nothing about uranium, and neither did they as much as dream that there were other time-lines. The secret of paratime transposition belonged exclusively to the First Level civilization which had discovered it, and it was a secret that was guarded well.

Stranor Sleth, dropping to the bottom of the antigrav shaft, cast a hasty and instinctive glance to the right, where the freight conveyers were. One was gone, taking its cargo over hundreds of thousands of para-years to the First Level. Another had just returned, empty, and a third was receiving its cargo from the robot mining machines far back under the mountain. Two young men and a girl, in First Level costumes, sat at a bank of instruments and visor-screens, handling the whole operation, and six or seven armed guards, having inspected the newly-arrived conveyer and finding that it had picked up nothing inimical en route, were relaxing and lighting cigarettes. Three of them, Stranor Sleth noticed, wore the green uniforms of the Paratime Police.

"When did those fellows get in?" he asked the people at the control desk, nodding toward the green-clad newcomers.

"About ten minutes ago, on the passenger conveyer," the girl told him. "The Big Boy's here. Brannad Klav. And a Paratime Police officer. They're in your office."

"Uh huh; I was expecting that," Stranor Sleth nodded. Then he turned down the corridor to the left.

Two men were waiting for him, in his office. One was short and stocky, with an angry, impatient face—Brannad Klav, Transtemporal's vice president in charge of operations. The other was tall and slender with handsome and entirely expressionless features; he wore a Paratime Police officer's uniform, with the blue badge of hereditary nobility on his breast, and carried a sigma-ray needler in a belt

holster.

"Were you waiting long, gentlemen?" Stranor Sleth asked. "I was holding Sunset Sacrifice up in the temple."

"No, we just got here," Brannad Klav said. "This is Verkan Vall, Mavrad of Nerros, special assistant to Chief Tortha of the Paratime Police, Stranor Sleth, our resident agent here."

Stranor Sleth touched hands with Verkan Vall.

"I've heard a lot about you, sir," he said. "Everybody working in paratime has, of course. I'm sorry we have a situation here that calls for your presence, but since we have, I'm glad you're here in person. You know what our trouble is, I suppose?"

"In a general way," Verkan Vall replied. "Chief Tortha, and Brannad Klav, have given me the main outline, but I'd like to have you fill in the details."

"Well, I told you everything," Brannad Klav interrupted impatiently. "It's just that Stranor's let this blasted local king, Kurchuk, get out of control. If I—" He stopped short, catching sight of the shoulder holster under Stranor Sleth's left arm. "Were you wearing that needler up in the temple?" he demanded.

"You're blasted right I was!" Stranor Sleth retorted. "And any time I can't arm myself for my own protection on this time-line, you can have my resignation. I'm not getting into the same jam as those people at Zurb."

"Well, never mind about that," Verkan Vall intervened. "Of course Stranor Sleth has a right to arm himself; I wouldn't think of being caught without a weapon on this time-line, myself. Now, Stranor, suppose you tell me what's been happening, here, from the beginning of this trouble."

"It started, really, about five years ago, when Kurchuk, the King of Zurb, married this Chuldun princess, Darith, from the country over beyond the Black Sea, and made her his queen, over the heads of about a dozen daughters of the local nobility, whom he'd married previously. Then he brought in this Chuldun scribe, Labdurg, and made him Overseer of the Kingdom—roughly, prime minister. There was a lot of dissatisfaction about that, and for a while it looked as though he was going to have a revolution on his hands, but he brought in about five thousand Chuldun mercenaries, all archers—these Hulguns can't shoot a bow worth beans—so the dissatisfaction died down, and so did most of the leaders of the disaffected group. The story I get is that this Labdurg arranged the marriage, in the first place. It looks to me as though the Chuldun emperor is intending to take over the Hulgun kingdoms, starting with Zurb.

"Well, these Chulduns all worship a god called Muz-Azin. Muz-Azin is a crocodile with wings like a bat and a lot of knife blades in his tail. He makes this Yat-Zar look downright beautiful. So do his habits. Muz-Azin fancies human sacrifices. The victims are strung up by the ankles on a triangular frame and lashed to

death with iron-barbed whips. Nasty sort of a deity, but this is a nasty time-line. The people here get a big kick out of watching these sacrifices. Much better show than our bunny-killing. The victims are usually criminals, or overage or incorrigible slaves, or prisoners of war.

"Of course, when the Chulduns began infiltrating the palace, they brought in their crocodile-god, too, and a flock of priests, and King Kurchuk let them set up a temple in the palace. Naturally, we preached against this heathen idolatry in our temples, but religious bigotry isn't one of the numerous imperfections of this sector. Everybody's deity is as good as anybody else's—indifferentism, I believe, is the theological term. Anyhow, on that basis things went along fairly well, till two years ago, when we had this run of bad luck."

"Bad luck!" Brannad Klav snorted. "That's the standing excuse of every incompetent!"

"Go on, Stranor; what sort of bad luck?" Verkan Vall asked.

"Well, first we had a drought, beginning in early summer, that burned up most of the grain crop. Then, when that broke, we got heavy rains and hailstorms and floods, and that destroyed what got through the dry spell. When they harvested what little was left, it was obvious there'd be a famine, so we brought in a lot of grain by conveyer and distributed it from the temples—miraculous gift of Yat-Zar, of course. Then the main office on First Level got scared about flooding this time-line with a lot of unaccountable grain and were afraid we'd make the people suspicious, and ordered it stopped.

"Then Kurchuk, and I might add that the kingdom of Zurb was the hardest hit by the famine, ordered his army mobilized and started an invasion of the Jumdun country, south of the Carpathians, to get grain. He got his army chopped up, and only about a quarter of them got back, with no grain. You ask me, I'd say that Labdurg framed it to happen that way. He advised Kurchuk to invade, in the first place, and I mentioned my suspicion that Chombrog, the Chuldun Emperor, is planning to move in on the Hulgun kingdoms. Well, what would be smarter than to get Kurchuk's army smashed in advance?"

"How did the defeat occur?" Verkan Vall asked. "Any suspicion of treachery?"

"Nothing you could put your finger on, except that the Jumduns seemed to have pretty good intelligence about Kurchuk's invasion route and battle plans. It could have been nothing worse than stupid tactics on Kurchuk's part. See, these Hulguns, and particularly the Zurb Hulguns, are spearmen. They fight in a fairly thin line, with heavy-armed infantry in front and light infantry with throwing-spears behind. The nobles fight in light chariots, usually at the center of the line, and that's where they were at this Battle of Jorm. Kurchuk himself was at the center, with his Chuldun archers massed around him.

"The Jumduns use a lot of cavalry, with long swords and lances, and a lot of big chariots with two javelin men and a driver. Well, instead of ramming into Kurchuk's center, where he had his archers, they hit the extreme left and folded it up, and then swung around behind and hit the right from the rear. All the Chuldun archers did was stand fast around the king and shoot anybody who came close to them: they were left pretty much alone. But the Hulgun spearmen were cut to pieces. The battle ended with Kurchuk and his nobles and his archers making a fighting retreat, while the Jumdun cavalry were chasing the spearmen every which way and cutting them down or lancing them as they ran.

"Well, whether it was Labdurg's treachery or Kurchuk's stupidity, in either case, it was natural for the archers to come off easiest and the Hulgun spearmen to pay the butcher's bill. But try and tell these knuckle-heads anything like that! Muz-Azin protected the Chulduns, and Yat-Zar let the Hulguns down, and that was all there was to it. The Zurb temple started losing worshipers, particularly the families of the men who didn't make it back from Jorm.

"If that had been all there'd been to it, though, it still wouldn't have hurt the mining operations, and we could have got by. But what really tore it was when the rabbits started to die." Stranor Sleth picked up a cigar from his desk and bit the end, spitting it out disgustedly. "Tularemia, of course," he said, touching his lighter to the tip. "When that hit, they started going over to Muz-Azin in droves, not only at Zurb but all over the Six Kingdoms. You ought to have seen the house we had for Sunset Sacrifice, this evening! About two hundred, and we used to get two thousand. It used to be all two men could do to lift the offering box at the door, afterward, and all the money we took in tonight I could put in one pocket!" The high priest used language that would have been considered unclerical even among the Hulguns.

Verkan Vall nodded. Even without the quickie hypno-mech he had taken for this sector, he knew that the rabbit was domesticated among the Proto-Aryan Hulguns and was their chief meat animal. Hulgun rabbits were even a minor import on the First Level, and could be had at all the better restaurants in cities like Dhergabar. He mentioned that.

"That's not the worst of it," Stranor Sleth told him. "See, the rabbit's sacred to Yat-Zar. Not taboo; just sacred. They have to use a specially consecrated knife to kill them—consecrating rabbit knives has always been an item of temple revenue—and they must say a special prayer before eating them. We could have got around the rest of it, even the Battle of Jorm—punishment by Yat-Zar for the sin of apostasy—but Yat-Zar just wouldn't make rabbits sick. Yat-Zar thinks too well of rabbits to do that, and it'd not been any use claiming he would. So there you are."

"Well, I take the attitude that this situation is the result of your incompetence," Brannad Klav began, in a bullyragging tone. "You're not only the high

priest of this temple, you're the acknowledged head of the religion in all the Hulgun kingdoms. You should have had more hold on the people than to allow anything like this to happen."

"Hold on the people!" Stranor Sleth fairly howled, appealing to Verkan Vall. "What does he think a religion is, on this sector, anyhow? You think these savages dreamed up that six-armed monstrosity, up there, to express their yearning for higher things, or to symbolize their moral ethos, or as a philosophical escape-hatch from the dilemma of causation? They never even heard of such matters. On this sector, gods are strictly utilitarian. As long as they take care of their worshipers, they get their sacrifices: when they can't put out, they have to get out. How do you suppose these Chulduns, living in the Caucasus Mountains, got the idea of a god like a crocodile, anyhow? Why, they got it from Homran traders, people from down in the Nile Valley. They had a god, once, something basically like a billy goat, but he let them get licked in a couple of battles, so out he went. Why, all the deities on this sector have hyphenated names, because they're combinations of several deities, worshiped in one person. Do you know anything about the history of this sector?" he asked the Paratime Police officer.

"Well, it develops from an alternate probability of what we call the Nilo-Mesopotamian Basic sector-group," Verkan Vall said. "On most Nilo-Mesopotamian sectors, like the Macedonian Empire Sector, or the Alexandrian-Roman or Alexandrian-Punic or Indo-Turanian or Europo-American, there was an Aryan invasion of Eastern Europe and Asia Minor about four thousand elapsed years ago. On this sector, the ancestors of the Aryans came in about fifteen centuries earlier, as neolithic savages, about the time that the Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations were first developing, and overran all southeast Europe, Asia Minor and the Nile Valley. They developed to the bronze-age culture of the civilizations they overthrew, and then, more slowly, to an iron-age culture. About two thousand years ago, they were using hardened steel and building large stone cities, just as they do now. At that time, they reached cultural stasis. But as for their religious beliefs, you've described them quite accurately. A god is only worshiped as long as the people think him powerful enough to aid and protect them; when they lose that confidence, he is discarded and the god of some neighboring people is adopted instead." He turned to Brannad Klav. "Didn't Stranor report this situation to you when it first developed?" he asked. "I know he did; he speaks of receiving shipments of grain by conveyer for temple distribution. Then why didn't you report it to Paratime Police? That's what we have a Paratime Police Force for."

"Well, yes, of course, but I had enough confidence in Stranor Sleth to think that he could handle the situation himself. I didn't know he'd gone slack—"

"Look, I can't make weather, even if my parishioners think I can," Stranor Sleth defended himself. "And I can't make a great military genius out of a block-

head like Kurchuk. And I can't immunize all the rabbits on this time-line against tularemia, even if I'd had any reason to expect a tularemia epidemic, which I hadn't because the disease is unknown on this sector; this is the only outbreak of it anybody's ever heard of on any Proto-Aryan time-line."

"No, but I'll tell you what you could have done," Verkan Vall told him. "When this Kurchuk started to apostatize, you could have gone to him at the head of a procession of priests, all paratimers and all armed with energy-weapons, and pointed out his spiritual duty to him, and if he gave you any back talk, you could have pulled out that needler and rayed him down and then cried, 'Behold the vengeance of Yat-Zar upon the wicked king!' I'll bet any sum at any odds that his successor would have thought twice about going over to Muz-Azin, and none of these other kings would have even thought once about it."

"Ha, that's what I wanted to do!" Stranor Sleth exclaimed. "And who stopped me? I'll give you just one guess."

"Well, it seems there was slackness here, but it wasn't Stranor Sleth who was slack," Verkan Vall commented.

"Well! I must say; I never thought I'd hear an officer of the Paratime Police criticizing me for trying to operate inside the Paratime Transposition Code!" Brannad Klav exclaimed.

Verkan Vall, sitting on the edge of Stranor Sleth's desk, aimed his cigarette at Brannad Klav like a blaster.

"Now, look," he began. "There is one, and only one, inflexible law regarding outtime activities. The secret of paratime transposition must be kept inviolate, and any activity tending to endanger it is prohibited. That's why we don't allow the transposition of any object of extraterrestrial origin to any time-line on which space travel has not been developed. Such an object may be preserved, and then, after the local population begin exploring the planet from whence it came, there will be dangerous speculations and theories as to how it arrived on Terra at such an early date. I came within inches, literally, of getting myself killed, not long ago, cleaning up the result of a violation of that regulation. For the same reason, we don't allow the export, to outtime natives, of manufactured goods too far in advance of their local culture. That's why, for instance, you people have to hand-finish all those big Yat-Zar idols, to remove traces of machine work. One of those things may be around, a few thousand years from now, when these people develop a mechanical civilization. But as far as raying down this Kurchuk is concerned, these Hulguns are completely nonscientific. They wouldn't have the least idea what happened. They'd believe that Yat-Zar struck him dead, as gods on this plane of culture are supposed to do, and if any of them noticed the needler at all, they'd think it was just a holy amulet of some kind."

"But the law is the law—" Brannad Klav began.

Verkan Vall shook his head. "Brannad, as I understand, you were promoted to your present position on the retirement of Salvan Marth, about ten years ago; up to that time, you were in your company's financial department. You were accustomed to working subject to the First Level Commercial Regulation Code. Now, any law binding upon our people at home, on the First Level, is inflexible. It has to be. We found out, over fifty centuries ago, that laws have to be rigid and without discretionary powers in administration in order that people may be able to predict their effect and plan their activities accordingly. Naturally, you became conditioned to operating in such a climate of legal inflexibility.

"But in paratime, the situation is entirely different. There exist, within the range of the Ghaldron-Hesthor paratemporal-field generator, a number of time-lines of the order of ten to the hundred-thousandth power. In effect, that many different worlds. In the past ten thousand years, we have visited only the tiniest fraction of these, but we have found everything from time-lines inhabited only by subhuman ape-men to Second Level civilizations which are our own equal in every respect but knowledge of paratemporal transposition. We even know of one Second Level civilization which is approaching the discovery of an interstellar hyperspatial drive, something we've never even come close to. And in between are every degree of savagery, barbarism and civilization. Now, it's just not possible to frame any single code of laws applicable to conditions on all of these. The best we can do is prohibit certain flagrantly immoral types of activity, such as slave-trading, introduction of new types of narcotic drugs, or out-and-out piracy and brigandage. If you're in doubt as to the legality of anything you want to do outtime, go to the Judicial Section of the Paratime Commission and get an opinion on it. That's where you made your whole mistake. You didn't find out just how far it was allowable for you to go."

He turned to Stranor Sleth again. "Well, that's the background, then. Now tell me about what happened yesterday at Zurb."

"Well, a week ago, Kurchuk came out with this decree closing our temple at Zurb and ordering his subjects to perform worship and make money offerings to Muz-Azin. The Zurb temple isn't a mask for a mine: Zurb's too far south for the uranium deposits. It's just a center for propaganda and that sort of thing. But they have a House of Yat-Zar, and a conveyer, and most of the upper-priests are paratimers. Well, our man there, Tammand Drav, alias Khoram, defied the king's order, so Kurchuk sent a company of Chuldun archers to close the temple and arrest the priests. Tammand Drav got all his people who were in the temple at the time into the House of Yat-Zar and transposed them back to the First Level. He had orders"—Stranor Sleth looked meaningly at Brannad Klav—"not to resist with energy-weapons or even ultrasonic paralyzers. And while we're on the subject of letting the local yokels see too much, about fifteen of the under-priests he took to the First Level were Hulgun natives."

"Nothing wrong about that: they'll get memory-obliteration and pseudo-memory treatment," Verkan Vall said. "But he should have been allowed to needle about a dozen of those Chulduns. Teach the beggars to respect Yat-Zar in the future. Now, how about the six priests who were outside the temple at the time? All but one were paratimers. We'll have to find out about them, and get them out of Zurb."

"That'll take some doing," Stranor Sleth said. "And it'll have to be done before sunset tomorrow. They are all in the dungeon of the palace citadel, and Kurchuk is going to give them to the priests of Muz-Azin to be sacrificed tomorrow evening."

"How'd you learn that?" Verkan Vall asked.

"Oh, we have a man in Zurb, not connected with the temple," Stranor Sleth said. "Name's Crannar Jurth; calls himself Kranjur, locally. He has a swordmaker's shop, employs about a dozen native journeymen and apprentices who hammer out the common blades he sells in the open market. Then, he imports a few high-class alloy-steel blades from the First Level, that'll cut through this local low-carbon armor like cheese. Fits them with locally-made hilts and sells them at unbelievable prices to the nobility. He's Swordsmith to the King; picks up all the inside palace dope. Of course, he was among the first to accept the New Gospel and go over to Muz-Azin. He has a secret room under his shop, with his conveyer and a radio.

"What happened was this: These six priests were at a consecration ceremony at a rabbit-ranch outside the city, and they didn't know about the raid on the temple. On their way back, they were surrounded by Chuldun archers and taken prisoner. They had no weapons but their sacrificial knives." He threw another dirty look at Brannad Klav. "So they're due to go up on the triangles at sunset tomorrow."

"We'll have to get them out before then," Verkan Vall stated. "They're our people, and we can't let them down; even the native is under our protection, whether he knows it or not. And in the second place, if those priests are sacrificed to Muz-Azin," he told Brannad Klav, "you can shut down everything on this time-line, pull out or disintegrate your installations, and fill in your mine-tunnels. Yat-Zar will be through on this time-line, and you'll be through along with him. And considering that your fissionables franchise for this sector comes up for renewal next year, your company will be through in this paratime area."

"You believe that would happen?" Brannad Klav asked anxiously.

"I know it will, because I'll put through a recommendation to that effect, if those six men are tortured to death tomorrow," Verkan Vall replied. "And in the fifty years that I've been in the Police Department, I've only heard of five such recommendations being ignored by the commission. You know, Fourth Level Min-

eral Products Syndicate is after your franchise. Ordinarily, they wouldn't have a chance of getting it, but with this, maybe they will, even without my recommendation. This was all your fault, for ignoring Stranor Sleth's proposal and for denying those men the right to carry energy weapons."

"Well, we were only trying to stay inside the Paratime Code," Brannad Klav pleaded. "If it isn't too late, now, you can count on me for every co-operation." He fiddled with some papers on the desk. "What do you want me to do to help?"

"I'll tell you that in a minute." Verkan Vall walked to the wall and looked at the map, then returned to Stranor Sleth's desk. "How about these dungeons?" he asked. "How are they located, and how can we get in to them?"

"I'm afraid we can't," Stranor Sleth told him. "Not without fighting our way in. They're under the palace citadel, a hundred feet below ground. They're spatially co-existent with the heavy water barriers around one of our company's plutonium piles on the First Level, and below surface on any unoccupied time-line I know of, so we can't transpose in to them. This palace is really a walled city inside a city. Here, I'll show you."

Going around the desk, he sat down and, after looking in the index-screen, punched a combination on the keyboard. A picture, projected from the microfilm-bank, appeared on the view-screen. It was an air-view of the city of Zurb—taken, the high priest explained, by infrared light from an airboat over the city at night. It showed a city of an entirely pre-mechanical civilization, with narrow streets, lined on either side by low one and two story buildings. Although there would be considerable snow in winter, the roofs were usually flat, probably massive stone slabs supported by pillars within. Even in the poorer sections, this was true except for the very meanest houses and out-buildings, which were thatched. Here and there, some huge pile of masonry would rear itself above its lower neighbors, and, where the streets were wider, occasional groups of large buildings would be surrounded by battlemented walls. Stranor Sleth indicated one of the larger of these.

"Here's the palace," he said. "And here's the temple of Yat-Zar, about half a mile away." He touched a large building, occupying an entire block; between it and the palace was a block-wide park, with lawns and trees on either side of a wide roadway connecting the two.

"Now, here's a detailed view of the palace." He punched another combination; the view of the City was replaced by one, taken from directly overhead, of the walled palace area. "Here's the main gate, in front, at the end of the road from the temple," he pointed out. "Over here, on the left, are the slaves' quarters and the stables and workshops and store houses and so on. Over here, on the other side, are the nobles' quarters. And this,"—he indicated a towering structure at the rear of the walled enclosure—"is the citadel and the royal dwelling. Audience

hall on this side; harem over here on this side. A wide stone platform, about fifteen feet high, runs completely across the front of the citadel, from the audience hall to the harem. Since this picture was taken, the new temple of Muz-Azin was built right about here." He indicated that it extended out from the audience hall into the central courtyard. "And out here on the platform, they've put up about a dozen of these triangles, about twelve feet high, on which the sacrificial victims are whipped to death."

"Yes. About the only way we could get down to the dungeons would be to make an airdrop onto the citadel roof and fight our way down with needlers and blasters, and I'm not willing to do that as long as there's any other way," Verkan Vall said. "We'd lose men, even with needlers against bows, and there's a chance that some of our equipment might be lost in the melee and fall into outtime hands. You say this sacrifice comes off tomorrow at sunset?"

"That would be about actual sunset plus or minus an hour; these people aren't astronomers, they don't even have good sundials, and it might be a cloudy day," Stranor Sleth said. "There will be a big idol of Muz-Azin on a cart, set about here." He pointed. "After the sacrifice, it is to be dragged down this road, outside, to the temple of Yat-Zar, and set up there. The temple is now occupied by about twenty Chuldun mercenaries and five or six priests of Muz-Azin. They haven't, of course, got into the House of Yat-Zar; the door's of impervium steel, about six inches thick, with a plating of collapsed nickel under the gilding. It would take a couple of hours to cut through it with our best atomic torch; there isn't a tool on this time-line that could even scratch it. And the insides of the walls are lined with the same thing."

"Do you think our people have been tortured, yet?" Verkan Vall asked.

"No." Stranor Sleth was positive. "They'll be fairly well treated, until the sacrifice. The idea's to make them last as long as possible on the triangles; Muz-Azin likes to see a slow killing, and so does the mob of spectators."

"That's good. Now, here's my plan. We won't try to rescue them from the dungeons. Instead, we'll transpose back to the Zurb temple from the First Level, in considerable force—say a hundred or so men—and march on the palace, to force their release. You're in constant radio communication with all the other temples on this time-line, I suppose?"

"Yes, certainly."

"All right. Pass this out to everybody, authority Paratime Police, in my name, acting for Tortha Karf. I want all paratimers who can possibly be spared to transpose to First Level immediately and rendezvous at the First Level terminal of the Zurb temple conveyer as soon as possible. Close down all mining operations, and turn over temple routine to the native under-priests. You can tell them that the upper-priests are retiring to their respective Houses of Yat-Zar to pray for the de-

liverance of the priests in the hands of King Kurchuk. And everybody is to bring back his priestly regalia to the First Level; that will be needed." He turned to Brannad Klav. "I suppose you keep spare regalia in stock on the First Level?"

"Yes, of course; we keep plenty of everything in stock. Robes, miters, false beards of different shades, everything."

"And these big Yat-Zar idols: they're mass-produced on the First Level? You have one available now? Good. I'll want some alterations made on one. For one thing, I'll want it plated heavily, all over, with collapsed nickel. For another, I'll want it fitted with antigrav units and some sort of propulsion-units, and a loudspeaker, and remote control.

"And, Stranor, you get in touch with this swordmaker, Crannar Jurth, and alert him to co-operate with us. Tell him to start calling Zurb temple on his radio about noon tomorrow, and keep it up till he gets an answer. Or, better, tell him to run his conveyer to his First Level terminal, and bring with him an extra suit of clothes appropriate to the role of journeyman-mechanic. I'll want to talk to him, and furnish him with special equipment. Got all that? Well, carry on with it, and bring your own paratimers, priests and mining operators, back with you as soon as you've taken care of everything. Brannad, you come with me, now. We're returning to First Level immediately. We have a lot of work to do, so let's get started."

"Anything I can do to help, just call on me for it," Brannad Klav promised earnestly. "And, Stranor, I want to apologize. I'll admit, now, that I ought to have followed your recommendations, when this situation first developed."

By noon of the next day, Verkan Vall had at least a hundred men gathered in the big room at the First Level fissionables refinery at Jarnabar, spatially co-existent with the Fourth Level temple of Yat-Zar at Zurb. He was having a little trouble distinguishing between them, for every man wore the fringed blue robe and golden miter of an upper-priest, and had his face masked behind a blue false beard. It was, he admitted to himself, a most ludicrous-looking assemblage; one of the most ludicrous things about it was the fact that it would have inspired only pious awe in a Hulgun of the Fourth Level Proto-Aryan Sector. About half of them were priests from the Transtemporal Mining Corporation's temples; the other half were members of the Paratime Police. All of them wore, in addition to their temple knives, holstered sigma-ray needlers. Most of them carried ultrasonic paralyzers, eighteen-inch batonlike things with bulbous ends. Most of the Paratime Police and a few of the priests also carried either heat-ray pistols or neutron-disruption blasters; Verkan Vall wore one of the latter in a left-hand belt holster.

The Paratime Police were lined up separately for inspection, and Stranor Sleth, Tammand Drav of the Zurb temple, and several other high priests were checking the authenticity of their disguises. A little apart from the others, a Paratime Policeman, in high priest's robes and beard, had a square box slung in front of

him; he was fiddling with knobs and buttons on it, practicing. A big idol of Yat-Zar, on antigravity, was floating slowly about the room in obedience to its remote controls, rising and lowering, turning about and pirouetting gracefully.

"Hey, Vall!" he called to his superior. "How's this?"

The idol rose about five feet, turned slowly in a half-circle, moved to the right a little, and then settled slowly toward the floor.

"Fine, fine, Horv," Verkan Vall told him, "but don't set it down on anything, or turn off the antigravity. There's enough collapsed nickel-plating on that thing to sink it a yard in soft ground."

"I don't know what the idea of that was," Brannad Klav, standing beside him, said. "Understand, I'm not criticizing. I haven't any right to, under the circumstances. But it seems to me that armoring that thing in collapsed nickel was an unnecessary precaution."

"Maybe it was," Verkan Vall agreed. "I sincerely hope so. But we can't take any chances. This operation has to be absolutely right. Ready, Tammand? All right; first detail into the conveyer."

He turned and strode toward a big dome of fine metallic mesh, thirty feet high and sixty in diameter, at the other end of the room. Tammand Drav, and his ten paratimer priests, and Brannad Klav, and ten Paratime Police, followed him in. One of the latter slid shut the door and locked it; Verkan Vall went to the control desk, at the center of the dome, and picked up a two-foot globe of the same fine metallic mesh, opening it and making some adjustments inside, then attaching an electric cord and closing it. He laid the globe on the floor near the desk and picked up the hand battery at the other end of the attached cord.

"Not taking any chances at all, are you?" Brannad Klav asked, watching this operation with interest.

"I never do, unnecessarily. There are too many necessary chances that have to be taken, in this work." Verkan Vall pressed the button on the hand battery. The globe on the floor flashed and vanished. "Yesterday, five paratimers were arrested. Any or all of them could have had door-activators with them. Stranor Sleth says they were not tortured, but that is a purely inferential statement. They may have been, and the use of the activator may have been extorted from one of them. So I want a look at the inside of that conveyer-chamber before we transpose into it."

He laid the hand battery, with the loose-dangling wire that had been left behind, on the desk, then lit a cigarette. The others gathered around, smoking and watching, careful to avoid the place from which the globe had vanished. Thirty minutes passed, and then, in a queer iridescence, the globe reappeared. Verkan Vall counted ten seconds and picked it up, taking it to the desk and opening it to remove a small square box. This he slid into a space under the desk and flipped a switch. Instantly, a view-screen lit up and a three-dimensional picture appeared—

the interior of a big room a hundred feet square and some seventy in height. There was a big desk and a radio; tables, couches, chairs and an arms-rack full of weapons, and at one end, a remarkably clean sixty-foot circle on the concrete floor, outlined in faintly luminous red.

"How about it?" Verkan Vall asked Tammand Drav. "Anything wrong?"

The Zurb high priest shook his head. "Just as we left it," he said. "Nobody's been inside since we left."

One of the policemen took Verkan Vall's place at the control desk and threw the master switch, after checking the instruments. Immediately, the paratemporal-transposition field went on with a humming sound that mounted to a high scream, then settled to a steady drone. The mesh dome flickered with a cold iridescence and vanished, and they were looking into the interior of a great fissionables refinery plant, operated by paratimers on another First Level time-line. The structural details altered, from time-line to time-line, as they watched. Buildings appeared and vanished. Once, for a few seconds, they were inside a cool, insulated bubble in the midst of molten lead. Tammand Drav jerked a thumb at it, before it vanished.

"That always bothers me," he said. "Bad place for the field to go weak. I'm fussy as an old hen about inspection of the conveyer, on account of that."

"Don't blame you," Verkan Vall agreed. "Probably the cooling system of a breeder-pile."

They passed more swiftly, now, across the Second Level and the Third. Once they were in the midst of a huge land battle, with great tanklike vehicles spouting flame at one another. Another moment was spent in an air bombardment. On any time-line, this section of East Europe was a natural battleground. Once a great procession marched toward them, carrying red banners and huge pictures of a coarse-faced man with a black mustache—Verkan Vall recognized the environment as Fourth Level Europo-American Sector. Finally, as the transposition-rate slowed, they saw a clutter of miserable thatched huts, in the rear of a granite wall of a Fourth Level Hulgun temple of Yat-Zar—a temple not yet infiltrated by Transtemporal Mining Corporation agents. Finally, they were at their destination. The dome around them became visible, and an overhead green light flashed slowly on and off.

Verkan Vall opened the door and stepped outside, his needler drawn. The House of Yat-Zar was just as he had seen it in the picture photographed by the automatic reconnaissance-conveyer. The others crowded outside after him. One of the regular priests pulled off his miter and beard and went to the radio, putting on a headset. Verkan Vall and Tammand Drav snapped on the visiscreen, getting a view of the Holy of Holies outside.

There were six men there, seated at the upper-priests' banquet table, drinking from golden goblets. Five of them wore the black robes with green facings which marked them as priests of Muz-Azin; the sixth was an officer of the Chuldun archers, in gilded mail and helmet.

"Why, those are the sacred vessels of the temple!" Tammand Drav cried, scandalized. Then he laughed in self-ridicule. "I'm beginning to take this stuff seriously, myself; time I put in for a long vacation. I was actually shocked at the sacrilege!"

"Well, let's overtake the infidels in their sins," Verkan Vall said. "Paralyzers will be good enough."

He picked up one of the bulb-headed weapons, and unlocked the door. Tammand Drav and another of the priests of the Zurb temple following and the others crowding behind, they passed out through the veils, and burst into the Holy of Holies. Verkan Vall pointed the bulb of his paralyzer at the six seated men and pressed the button; other paralyzers came into action, and the whole sextet were knocked senseless. The officer rolled from his chair and fell to the floor in a clatter of armor. Two of the priests slumped forward on the table. The others merely sank back in their chairs, dropping their goblets.

"Give each one of them another dose, to make sure," Verkan Vall directed a couple of his own men. "Now, Tammand; any other way into the main temple beside that door?"

"Up those steps," Tammand Drav pointed. "There's a gallery along the side; we can cover the whole room from there."

"Take your men and go up there. I'll take a few through the door. There'll be about twenty archers out there, and we don't want any of them loosing any arrows before we can knock them out. Three minutes be time enough?"

"Easily. Make it two," Tammand Drav said.

He took his priests up the stairway and vanished into the gallery of the temple. Verkan Vall waited until one minute had passed and then, followed by Brannad Klav and a couple of Paratime Policemen, he went under the plinth and peered out into the temple. Five or six archers, in steel caps and sleeveless leather jackets sewn with steel rings, were gathered around the altar, cooking something in a pot on the fire. Most of the others, like veteran soldiers, were sprawled on the floor, trying to catch a short nap, except half a dozen, who crouched in a circle, playing some game with dice—another almost universal military practice.

The two minutes were up. He aimed his paralyzer at the men around the altar and squeezed the button, swinging it from one to another and knocking them down with a bludgeon of inaudible sound. At the same time, Tammand Drav and his detail were stunning the gamblers. Stepping forward and to one side, Verkan Vall, Brannad Klav and the others took care of the sleepers on the floor. In less

than thirty seconds, every Chuldun in the temple was incapacitated.

"All right, make sure none of them come out of it prematurely," Verkan Vall directed. "Get their weapons, and be sure nobody has a knife or anything hidden on him. Who has the syringe and the sleep-drug ampoules?"

Somebody had, it developed, who was still on the First Level, to come up with the second conveyer load. Verkan Vall swore. Something like this always happened, on any operation involving more than half a dozen men.

"Well, some of you stay here: patrol around, and use your paralyzers on anybody who even twitches a muscle." Ultrasonics were nice, effective, humane police weapons, but they were unreliable. The same dose that would keep one man out for an hour would paralyze another for no more than ten or fifteen minutes. "And be sure none of them are playing 'possum."

He went back through the door under the plinth, glancing up at the decorated wooden screen and wondering how much work it would take to move the new Yat-Zar in from the conveyers. The five priests and the archer-captain were still unconscious; one of the policemen was searching them.

"Here's the sort of weapons these priests carry," he said, holding up a short iron mace with a spiked head. "Carry them on their belts." He tossed it on the table, and began searching another knocked-out hierophant. "Like this—_Hey!_ Look at this, will you!"

He drew his hand from under the left side of the senseless man's robe and held up a sigma-ray needler. Verkan Vall looked at it and nodded grimly.

"Had it in a regular shoulder holster," the policeman said, handing the weapon across the table. "What do you think?"

"Find anything else funny on him?"

"Wait a minute." The policeman pulled open the robe and began stripping the priest of Muz-Azin; Verkan Vall came around the table to help. There was nothing else of a suspicious nature.

"Could have got it from one of the prisoners, but I don't like the familiar way he's wearing that holster," Verkan Vall said. "Has the conveyer gone back, yet?" When the policeman nodded, he continued: "When it returns, take him to the First Level. I hope they bring up the sleep-drug with the next load. When you get him back, take him to Dhergabar by strato-rocket immediately, and make sure he gets back alive. I want him questioned under narco-hypnosis by a regular Paratime Commission psycho-technician, in the presence of Chief Tortha Karf and some responsible Commission official. This is going to be hot stuff."

Within an hour, the whole force was assembled in the temple. The wooden screen had presented no problem—it slid easily to one side—and the big idol floated on antigravity in the middle of the temple. Verkan Vall was looking anxiously at his watch.

"It's about two hours to sunset," he said, to Stranor Sleth. "But as you pointed out, these Hulguns aren't astronomers, and it's a bit cloudy. I wish Crannar Jurth would call in with something definite."

Another twenty minutes passed. Then the man at the radio came out into the temple.

"O. K.!" he called. "The man at Crannar Jurth's called in. Crannar Jurth contacted him with a midget radio he has up his sleeve; he's in the palace courtyard now. They haven't brought out the victims, yet, but Kurchuk has just been carried out on his throne to that platform in front of the citadel. Big crowd gathering in the inner courtyard; more in the streets outside. Palace gates are wide open."

"That's it!" Verkan Vall cried. "Form up; the parade's starting. Brannad, you and Tammand and Stranor and I in front; about ten men with paralyzers a little behind us. Then Yat-Zar, about ten feet off the ground, and then the others. Forward—*ho-o!*"

They emerged from the temple and started down the broad roadway toward the palace. There was not much of a crowd, at first. Most of Zurb had flocked to the palace earlier; the lucky ones in the courtyard and the late comers outside. Those whom they did meet stared at them in open-mouthed amazement, and then some, remembering their doubts and blasphemies, began howling for forgiveness. Others—a substantial majority—realizing that it would be upon King Kurchuk that the real weight of Yat-Zar's six hands would fall, took to their heels, trying to put as much distance as possible between them and the palace before the blow fell.

As the procession approached the palace gates, the crowds were thicker, made up of those who had been unable to squeeze themselves inside. The panic was worse, here, too. A good many were trampled and hurt in the rush to escape, and it became necessary to use paralyzers to clear a way. That made it worse: everybody was sure that Yat-Zar was striking sinners dead left and right.

Fortunately, the gates were high enough to let the god through without losing altitude appreciably. Inside, the mob surged back, clearing a way across the courtyard. It was only necessary to paralyze a few here, and the levitated idol and its priestly attendants advanced toward the stone platform, where the king sat on his throne, flanked by court functionaries and black-robed priests of Muz-Azin. In front of this, a rank of Chuldun archers had been drawn up.

"Horv; move Yat-Zar forward about a hundred feet and up about fifty," Verkan Vall directed. "Quickly!"

As the six-armed anthropomorphic idol rose and moved closer toward its saurian rival, Verkan Vall drew his needler, scanning the assemblage around the throne anxiously.

"*Where is the wicked King*?" a voice thundered—the voice of Stranor Sleth,

speaking into a midget radio tuned to the loud-speaker inside the idol. "*Where is the blasphemer and desecrator, Kurchuk*?"

"There's Labdurg, in the red tunic, beside the throne," Tammand Drav whispered. "And that's Ghromdur, the Muz-Azin high priest, beside him."

Verkan Vall nodded, keeping his eyes on the group on the platform. Ghromdur, the high priest of Muz-Azin, was edging backward and reaching under his robe. At the same time, an officer shouted an order, and the Chuldun archers drew arrows from their quivers and fitted them to their bowstrings. Immediately, the ultrasonic paralyzers of the advancing paratimers went into action, and the mercenaries began dropping.

"*Lay down your weapons, fools!*" the amplified voice boomed at them. "*Lay down your weapons or you shall surely die! Who are you, miserable wretches, to draw bows against Me*?"

At first a few, then all of them, the Chulduns lowered or dropped their weapons and began edging away to the sides. At the center, in front of the throne, most of them had been knocked out. Verkan Vall was still watching the Muz-Azin high priest intently; as Ghromdur raised his arm, there was a flash and a puff of smoke from the front of Yat-Zar—the paint over the collapsed nickel was burned off, but otherwise the idol was undamaged. Verkan Vall swung up his needler and rayed Ghromdur dead; as the man in the green-faced black robes fell, a blaster clattered on the stone platform.

"*Is that your puny best, Muz-Azin*?" the booming voice demanded. "*Where is your high priest now*?"

"Horv; face Yat-Zar toward Muz-Azin," Verkan Vall said over his shoulder, drawing his blaster with his left hand. Like all First Level people, he was ambidextrous, although, like all paratimers, he habitually concealed the fact while outtime. As the levitated idol swung slowly to look down upon its enemy on the built-up cart, Verkan Vall aimed the blaster and squeezed.

In a spot less than a millimeter in diameter on the crocodile idol's side, a certain number of neutrons in the atomic structure of the stone from which it was carved broke apart, becoming, in effect, atoms of hydrogen. With a flash and a bang, the idol burst and vanished. Yat-Zar gave a dirty laugh and turned his back on the cart, which was now burning fiercely facing King Kurchuk again.

"Get your hands up, all of you!" Verkan Vall shouted, in the First Level language, swinging the stubby muzzle of the blaster and the knob-tipped twin tubes of the needler to cover the group around the throne, "Come forward, before I start blasting!"

Labdurg raised his hands and stepped forward. So did two of the priests of Yat-Zar. They were quickly seized by Paratime Policemen who swarmed up onto the platform and disarmed. All three were carrying sigma-ray needlers, and

Labdurg had a blaster as well.

King Kurchuk was clinging to the arms of his throne, a badly frightened monarch trying desperately not to show it. He was a big man, heavy-shouldered, black-bearded; under ordinary circumstances he would probably have cut an imposing figure, in his gold-washed mail and his golden crown. Now his face was a dirty gray, and he was biting nervously at his lower lip. The others on the platform were in even worse state. The Hulgun nobles were grouped together, trying to disassociate themselves from both the king and the priests of Muz-Azin. The latter were staring in a daze at the blazing cart from which their idol had just been blasted. And the dozen men who were to have done the actual work of the torture-sacrifice had all dropped their whips and were fairly gibbering in fear.

Yat-Zar, manipulated by the robed paratimer, had taken a position directly above the throne and was lowering slowly. Kurchuk stared up at the massive idol descending toward him, his knuckles white as he clung to the arms of his throne. He managed to hold out until he could feel the weight of the idol pressing on his head. Then, with a scream, he hurled himself from the throne and rolled forward almost to the edge of the platform. Yat-Zar moved to one side, swung slightly and knocked the throne toppling, and then settled down on the platform. To Kurchuk, who was rising cautiously on his hands and knees, the big idol seemed to be looking at him in contempt.

"*Where are my holy priests, Kurchuk*?" Stranor Sleth demanded in to his sleeve-hidden radio. "*Let them be brought before me, alive and unharmed, or it shall be better for you had you never been born!*"

The six priests of Yat-Zar, it seemed, were already being brought onto the platform by one of Kurchuk's nobles. This noble, whose name was Yorzuk, knew a miracle when he saw one, and believed in being on the side of the god with the heaviest artillery. As soon as he had seen Yat-Zar coming through the gate without visible means of support, he had hastened to the dungeons with half a dozen of his personal retainers and ordered the release of the six captives. He was now escorting them onto the platform, assuring them that he had always been a faithful servant of Yat-Zar and had been deeply grieved at his sovereign's apostasy.

"*Hear my word, Kurchuk*," Stranor Sleth continued through the loud-speaker in the idol. "*You have sinned most vilely against me, and were I a cruel god, your fate would be such as no man has ever before suffered. But I am a merciful god; behold, you may gain forgiveness in my sight. For thirty days, you shall neither eat meat nor drink wine, nor shall you wear gold nor fine raiment, and each day shall you go to my temple and beseech me for my forgiveness. And on the thirty-first day, you shall set out, barefoot and clad in the garb of a slave, and journey to my temple that is in the mountains over above Yoldav, and there will I forgive you, after you have made sacrifice to me. I, Yat-Zar, have spoken!*"

The king started to rise, babbling thanks.

"*Rise not before me until I have forgiven you*!" Yat-Zar thundered. "*Creep out of my sight upon your belly, wretch!*"

The procession back to the temple was made quietly and sedately along an empty roadway. Yat-Zar seemed to be in a kindly humor; the people of Zurb had no intention of giving him any reason to change his mood. The priests of Muz-Azin and their torturers had been flung into the dungeon. Yorzuk, appointed regent for the duration of Kurchuk's penance, had taken control and was employing Hulgun spearmen and hastily-converted Chuldun archers to restore order and, incidentally, purge a few of his personal enemies and political rivals. The priests, with the three prisoners who had been found carrying First Level weapons among them and Yat-Zar floating triumphantly in front, entered the temple. A few of the devout, who sought admission after them, were told that elaborate and secret rites were being held to cleanse the profaned altar, and sent away.

Verkan Vall and Brannad Klav and Stranor Sleth were in the conveyer chamber, with the Paratime Policemen and the extra priests; along with them were the three prisoners. Verkan Vall pulled off his false beard and turned to face these. He could see that they all recognized him.

"Now," he began, "you people are in a bad jam. You've violated the Paratime Transposition Code, the Commercial Regulation Code, and the First Level Criminal Code, all together. If you know what's good for you, you'll start talking."

"I'm not saying anything till I have legal advice," the man who had been using the local alias of Labdurg replied. "And if you're through searching me, I'd like to have my cigarettes and lighter back."

"Smoke one of mine, for a change," Verkan Vall told him. "I don't know what's in yours beside tobacco." He offered his case and held a light for the prisoner before lighting his own cigarette. "I'm going to be sure you get back to the First Level alive."

The former Overseer of the Kingdom of Zurb shrugged. "I'm still not talking," he said.

"Well, we can get it all out of you by narco-hypnosis, anyhow," Verkan Vall told him. "Besides, we got that man of yours who was here at the temple when we came in. He's being given a full treatment, as a presumed outtime native found in possession of First Level weapons. If you talk now it'll go easier with you."

The prisoner dropped the cigarette on the floor and tramped it out.

"Anything you cops get out of me, you'll have to get the hard way," he said. "I have friends on the First Level who'll take care of me."

"I doubt that. They'll have their hands full taking care of themselves, after this gets out." Verkan Vall turned to the two in the black robes. "Either of you want to say anything?" When they shook their heads, he nodded to a group of his po-

licemen; they were hustled into the conveyer. "Take them to the First Level terminal and hold them till I come in. I'll be along with the next conveyer load."

The conveyer flashed and vanished. Brannad Klav stared for a moment at the circle of concrete floor from whence it had disappeared. Then he turned to Verkan Vall.

"I still can't believe it," he said. "Why, those fellows were First Level paratimers. So was that priest, Ghromdur: the one you rayed."

"Yes, of course. They worked for your rivals, the Fourth Level Mineral Products Syndicate; the outfit that was trying to get your Proto-Aryan Sector fissionables franchise away from you. They operate on this sector already; have the petroleum franchise for the Chuldun country, east of the Caspian Sea. They export to some of these internal-combustion-engine sectors, like Europo-American. You know, most of the wars they've been fighting, lately, on the Europo-American Sector have been, at least in part, motivated by rivalry for oil fields. But now that the Europo-Americans have begun to release nuclear energy, fissionables have become more important than oil. In less than a century, it's predicted that atomic energy will replace all other forms of power. Mineral Products Syndicate wanted to get a good source of supply for uranium, and your Proto-Aryan Sector franchise was worth grabbing.

"I had considered something like this as a possibility when Stranor, here, mentioned that tularemia was normally unknown in Eurasia on this sector. That epidemic must have been started by imported germs. And I knew that Mineral Products has agents at the court of the Chuldun emperor, Chombrog: they have to, to protect their oil wells on his eastern frontiers. I spent most of last night checking up on some stuff by video-transcription from the Paratime Commission's microfilm library at Dhergabar. I found out, for one thing, that while there is a King Kurchuk of Zurb on every time-line for a hundred para-years on either side of this one, this is the only time-line on which he married a Princess Darith of Chuldun, and it's the only time-line on which there is any trace of a Chuldun scribe named Labdurg.

"That's why I went to all the trouble of having that Yat-Zar plated with collapsed nickel. If there were disguised paratimers among the Muz-Azin party at Kurchuk's court, I expected one of them to try to blast our idol when we brought it into the palace. I was watching Ghromdur and Labdurg in particular; as soon as Ghromdur used his blaster, I needled him. After that, it was easy."

"Was that why you insisted on sending that automatic viewer on ahead?"

"Yes. There was a chance that they might have planted a bomb in the House of Yat-Zar, here. I knew they'd either do that or let the place entirely alone. I suppose they were so confident of getting away with this that they didn't want to damage the conveyer or the conveyer chamber. They expected to use them, them-

selves, after they took over your company's franchise."

"Well, what's going to be done about it by the Commission?" Brannad Klav wanted to know.

"Plenty. The syndicate will probably lose their paratime license; any of its officials who had guilty knowledge of this will be dealt with according to law. You know, this was a pretty nasty business."

"You're telling me!" Stranor Sleth exclaimed. "Did you get a look at those whips they were going to use on our people? Pointed iron barbs a quarter-inch long braided into them, all over the lash-ends!"

"Yes. Any punitive action you're thinking about taking on these priests of Muz-Azin—the natives, I mean—will be ignored on the First Level. And that reminds me: you'd better work out a line of policy, pretty soon."

"Well, as for the priests and the torturers, I think I'll tell Yorzuk to have them sold to the Bhunguns, to the east. They're always in the market for galley slaves," Stranor Sleth said. He turned to Brannad Klav. "And I'll want six gold crowns made up, as soon as possible. Strictly Hulgun design, with Yat-Zar religious symbolism, very rich and ornate, all slightly different. When I give Kurchuk absolution, I'll crown him at the altar in the name of Yat-Zar. Then I'll invite in the other five Hulgun kings, lecture them on their religious duties, make them confess their secret doubts, forgive them, and crown them, too. From then on, they can all style themselves as ruling by the will of Yat-Zar."

"And from then on, you'll have all of them eating out of your hand," Verkan Vall concluded. "You know, this will probably go down in Hulgun history as the Reformation of Ghullam the Holy. I've always wondered whether the theory of the divine right of kings was invented by the kings, to establish their authority over the people, or by the priests, to establish *their* authority over the kings. It works about as well one way as the other."

"What I can't understand is this," Brannad Klav said. "It was entirely because of my respect for the Paratime Code that I kept Stranor Sleth from using Fourth Level weapons and other techniques to control these people with a show of apparent miraculous powers. But this Fourth Level Mineral Products Syndicate was operating in violation of the Paratime Code by invading our franchise area. Why didn't they fake up a supernatural reign of terror to intimidate these natives?"

"Ha, exactly because they *were* operating illegally," Verkan Vall replied. "Suppose they had started using needlers and blasters and antigravity and nuclear-energy around here. The natives would have thought it was the power of Muz-Azin, of course, but what would you have thought? You'd have known, as soon as they tried it, that First Level paratimers were working against you, and you'd have laid the facts before the Commission, and this time-line would have been flooded with Paratime Police. They had to conceal their operations not only from the na-

tives, as you do, but also from us. So they didn't dare make public use of First Level techniques.

"Of course, when we came marching into the palace with that idol on anti-gravity, they knew, at once, what was happening. I have an idea that they only tried to blast that idol to create a diversion which would permit them to escape—if they could have got out of the palace, they'd have made their way, in disguise, to the nearest Mineral Products Syndicate conveyer and transposed out of here. I realized that they could best delay us by blasting our idol, and that's why I had it plated with collapsed nickel. I think that where they made their mistake was in allowing Kurchuk to have those priests arrested, and insisting on sacrificing them to Muz-Azin. If it hadn't been for that, the Paratime Police wouldn't have been brought into this, at all.

"Well, Stranor, you'll want to get back to your temple, and Brannad and I want to get back to the First Level. I'm supposed to take my wife to a banquet in Dhergabar, tonight, and with the fastest strato-rocket, I'll just barely make it."